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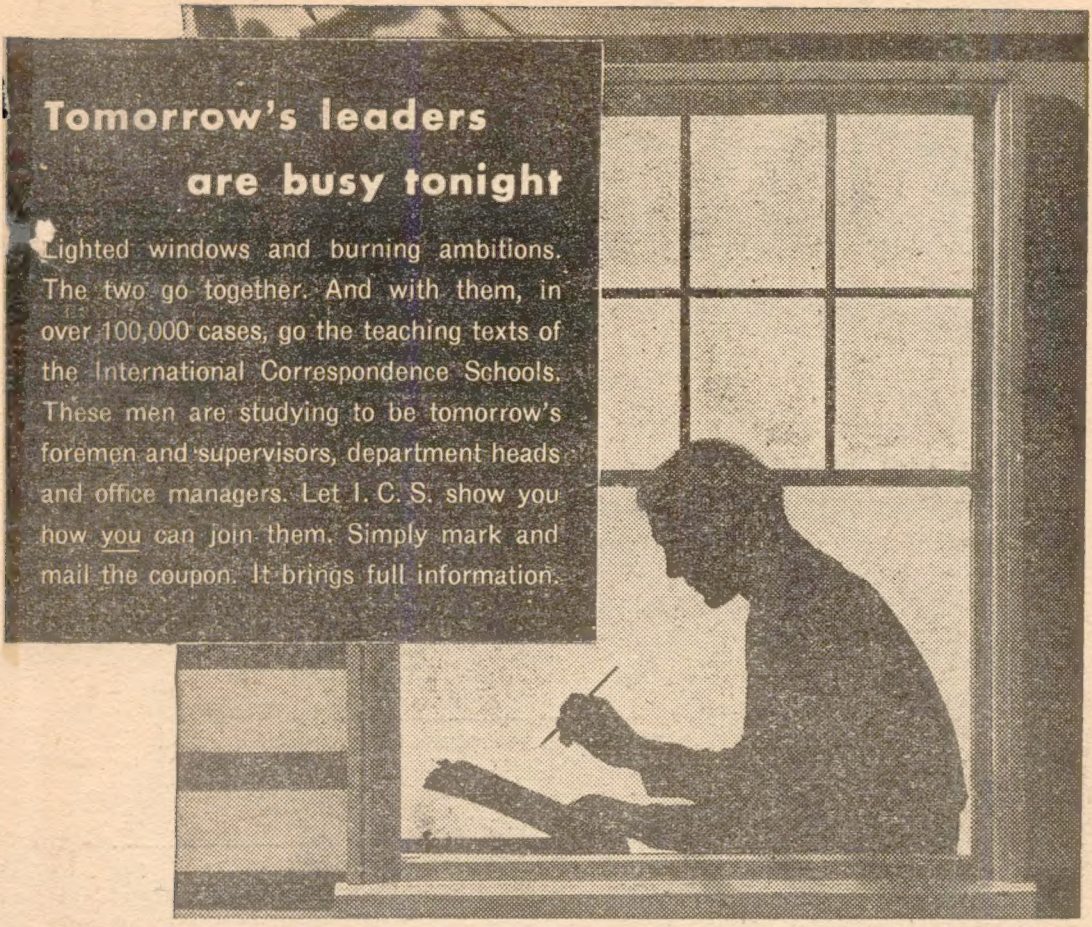

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132 Pages

Volume 3 | July, 1953 | Number 5

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It would take a woman to divert the vicious Bart, and Dora was too shy.

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★ *MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, Editor*

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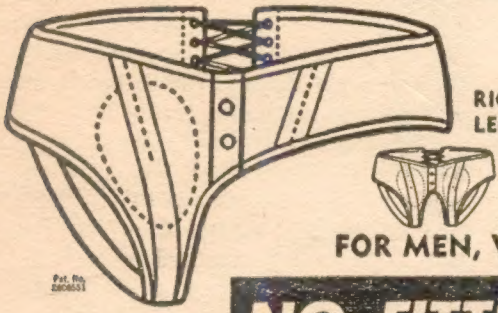

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The West As It Was

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WARRIOR WOMAN by Harold Gluck

A LONG TIME ago, once while the Skidi were on the summer hunt, some of their young men made up their minds that they would like to go off on the war-path. They started, travelling on foot, and went a long way up into the Sioux country. At last they came to a village. After it was dark they went into the camp and took many ponies. Then they brought them out onto the prairie and started for home, riding very fast.

One day, in the afternoon, just as they were riding along, they suddenly came upon a war-party of Sioux returning to the village they had just left. The Sioux charged them very bravely, and they had a battle. The Skidi killed five Sioux; but in the fight, all their ponies were taken from them—and nine of the ten men in the party were killed.

Among the killed was the leader of the war-party. Only one young man, a servant, got away. He travelled back toward the village. When he arrived, the wife of the leader of this war-party was sitting at the edge of the village. She was working on a buffalo robe, putting on beads and porcupine quills. It was to be a present for her husband. She was young, beautiful, and hated war; her name was Peaceful Dove.

When the people heard that their friends had been killed, they all began to cry for them. The mother of this young woman went to her where she was sitting and told her the sad news. "Come home and mourn for thy dead," she said.

But Peaceful Dove did not stop to mourn. She kept on working on the robe. She said to her mother, "Now

[*Continued From Page* 8]

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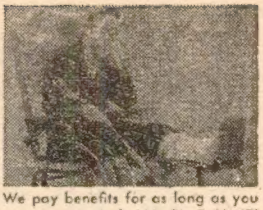

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I am nearly through fixing up this robe. And when it is done I will go back to the lodge."

As soon as she had finished her work she went into the village and to the lodge where the servant lived who had just returned. She asked him at what place her husband had been killed. "Describe the spot carefully to me," she asked, "so that if I ever came to it I would know it."

She did not shed one tear as the man carefully gave a full description. She went to her lodge. In the night she got the two fastest horses belonging to her beloved dead husband. On one she packed corn and dried meat. On the other she put on the buffalo robe she had just finished. Then she mounted that horse and started for the place where her husband had been killed.

After travelling for two days she came to the place where the dead lay. They had been scalped and cut nearly to pieces. She looked at her husband and saw that he had been scalped. "I shall not rest until I avenge what has been done to my beloved," she swore.

Then she started on the trail of the Sioux. After three days' hard travel, she came to the top of a hill from which she could look down and see the Sioux camp. There she hid herself in a thicket and when night came she crept down close to the camp. Soon she saw in the circle of the lodges in the center of the village a big fire. She went into the camp and found the men and women dancing around this fire. The women were holding long poles with scalps tied to them. They were dancing in a ring and the men danced outside of the women's circle. Peaceful Dove watched the dancing until she had made up her mind which man was the leader of the Sioux. He had taken from the leader of the Skidi war party the sacred bundle that he had carried. And now it was on his back. Peaceful Dove had recognized this bundle.

AFTER SHE had seen all this, she put her robe around her, and then went in among the women dancers of the Sioux and danced with them. As they danced around in a circle, every time the Skidi woman came in front of the man who carried the bundle, she would take the robe off her head so that the man might see her. She was playing a game played for centuries by the whites as well as the redskins. It was called Temptation and Destruction.

The Sioux war-chief looked closely at her, for he did not know her. But he liked her because she was very pretty. About the middle of the night, the woman began to dance up to the man and to dance before him for a few minutes. Then she would go on dancing around the circle. At last everybody got tired and they all stopped dancing and began to go to their lodges. The war-chief now went up to this woman and pulled her to him and took her to one side. He then tried to get her to go with him to his lodge. But she would not go; she would pull him toward her and finally he went with her.

Just outside the village, they stopped and sat down on the prairie to talk. The man spoke to her but she could not understand him. She did not know the Sioux language. He tried to put his arm around her but the bundle that hung on his back was in his way. So he took it off and put it on the ground. Then he caught her and put his arm around her waist. She put her left arm about his neck. Then holding his head close to her, she drew her knife and thrust it into his throat. Over and over again until he was dead.

Then she stood up and took up the sacred bundle. She cut off the war-chief's head and went to where her horses were hidden. She tied the head and the bundle to her saddle and started back to her village. After she had travelled for two days, she stopped for a long rest. Here she took the head from the saddle and took the scalp off it. This she put on a pole.

[*Turn To Page* 49]

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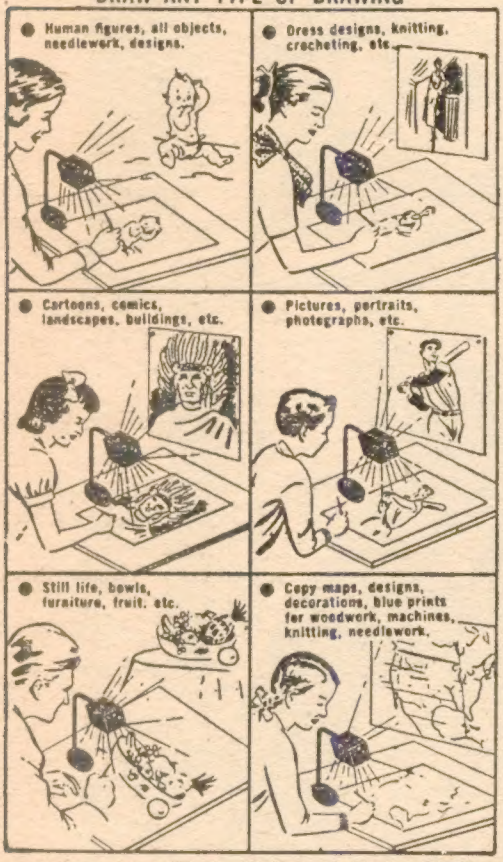
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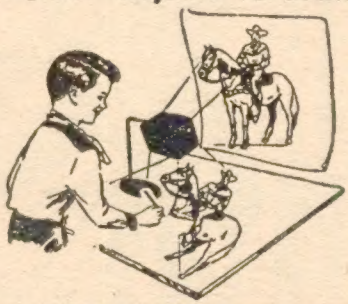

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SENT ON APPROVAL

"Don't be frightened", Jase said as he picked the girl up. The roughneck who'd tried to shove her off the plankwalk now sprawled in the mud himself . . .

Deborah needed a man who'd love her above all else, and who was tough enough to fight his own battles — and hers, too!

GIRL FROM THE BUENA VISTA

Feature Romantic Novel

Francis Flick

THE CLIPPER ship, *Orion,* had dropped anchor in San Francisco Bay. Jason Grant felt a kind of churning excitement as he looked at the dozens of boats of all sizes already anchored; boats from China and Hawaii and, like Jason's, from New York around the Horn. Six long months to get here. Sometimes when the winds had acted coy and flirted away from them like a woman, he'd thought he'd never reach this town that glittered now with gold dust, this San Francisco of mud and harlots and infamy on its Barbary Coast. There were other men too who saw their future here as he did. Who'd fight for it and maybe die.

Jase straightened his broad shoulders while the breeze tossed his curly black hair. There'd be fights all right before he was through and a kind of glee came into his startling blue eyes. But in the end there'd be money for that ranch stocked with fat cattle and sleek horses. It was his reason for coming with stores to open another mercantile.

In New York Jase almost hadn't believed the reports that coffee was bringing four to five dollars a pound in San Francisco. That butcher-knives went for thirty dollars and a blanket of the commonest sort for a minimum of forty dollars and that boots of good quality would bring a hundred a pair. And Jase

had 'em all right here on the clipper! Another supply of stores was half way here and still another was just leaving New York. He'd planned it well.

Jase stood looking ahead at the San Francisco hills, wondering if he'd find his future and his dreams here. He could almost feel that ranch within his grasp.

The captain stepped out of his cabin and agreed to hold Jase's goods until he brought men and boats to move them this afternoon. He'd have to find a store, he explained, and there was a flicker of deep amusement in the captain's eyes.

"Goin' ashore!" A fog horn voice bellowed and Jase looked over the side down at the biggest, ugliest man he'd ever seen. The giant filled half the rowboat and around his neck was a knife slung on a lanyard. He squinted up at Jase.

"Ten dollars gold to row you ashore." He grimaced for a smile.

Jase turned to the captain. "Isn't that robbery, that price?"

"It's cheap enough compared to some." The captain eyed him with that same amusement. "This is San Francisco, Mr. Grant. You'll find all prices scaled to what you'll get for a pound of coffee."

Jase flushed. There was contempt in the older man's voice that made him feel like a gangling kid.

FIVE MINUTES later the ugly giant was rowing Jase ashore. Half way in, the man stopped the rowboat, his arms holding the oars while ham-like hands hung between his knees. He grimaced again.

"There's a little mistake in that price, mister. It'll be thirty dollars to row you in. Now, in gold." His eyes were greedy. "Or I toss you overboard."

"What's your name?" Jase asked pleasantly.

"Name of Billy. Get the money up," he growled.

"Sure." Jase started to reach into his pocket and saw the man relax, knowing he had a cowardly sucker. "Sure," he repeated.

Then Jase moved in one blur of perfectly coordinated motion. He hit the unsuspecting Billy low and heaved him up and over the side of the boat. Billy hit the water with the splash of a self-respecting whale. When he surfaced, his face was ugly stunned fury. Jase laughed happily as he rowed himself on to shore.

He beached the boat and stood looking at the town that was thriving like a mushroom. A few streets cut through the hills, neither graded or paved and amazingly uneven and irregular. The continual passage of men and animals and wagons had turned the streets into gigantic mudholes. The mud was so bad in the heart of town that some wit had posted a sign reading:

This street is Impassable
Not even Jackassable.

Jase laughed as he tightened his belt, glad that he wore homespun trousers and hadn't changed to broadcloth and a white shirt.

IT WAS then he saw the girl.

She was starting across the muddy mire toward the higher bank of the wide paths fronting the shops. She seemed uncertain as she stepped on the eighteen inch plank and she held her flounced skirts up so that her high laced shoes showed daintily. Her bonnet slipped and she grabbed it, letting the sun light her dark auburn hair. About half way across she stopped, her gray eyes filled with terror.

Jase looked at her, knowing that it couldn't be he who'd almost scared her witless. He wheeled. A bearded drunk with a perverted sense of humor was tugging at the plank with the very evident intent of tossing the girl into the mire. He was chuckling hilariously when Jase shoved him hard. The man sprawled waist deep into the mud.

The girl seemed frozen now, unable to move and Jase walked quick-

ly to her. He smiled as he picked her up and started carrying her across.

"Don't be frightened," he said gently and felt her arm tighten around his neck.

Her deep gray eyes looked into his and unconsciously he stopped. She was beautiful and he loved the fragrance of her hair. There was sudden confusion in her eyes as they looked steadily back into his. It seemed to him that deep in them something kindled for a moment and was gone. He bent his black head and his lips touched hers lightly, but not so lightly that the warmth of her mouth didn't tingle through him.

"Who are you?" he asked huskily.

"Deborah Reynolds," she murmured. "And you?"

"Jason Grant, New York merchant just off the clipper, Orion." His arms tightened. "Tell me where I can see you, Deborah. Because now I've found you I'm not letting you go."

"I..." She stopped and became instantly prim and a little haughty. "Please put me down, Mr. Grant." But her hand lingered on his shoulder.

Jase noticed the man then who waited for them. A tall slender man dressed in broadcloth and a spotless boiled shirt, carefully he removed his top hat. Anger flashed in his dark eyes and his face was flushed with annoyance.

"Hello, Amos," she called gayly. "Mr. Grant rescued me." She glanced disdainfully at the bearded drunk who'd crawled out of the mud and was trying to get some of it out of his whiskers. "From that man." Jase put her down and she introduced him to Amos Terry.

"You're a stranger here." Amos made it sound as if it were a crime, yet not so long ago he must have been a stranger here himself.

"From New York." Since Amos made no motion to shake hands, neither did Jase. It wouldn't take a hell of a lot, he decided, to make him really dislike Amos Terry.

"Shall we go, Deborah?" Amos eyed Jase sternly. "Miss Reynolds is to be my future wife and I thank you for what assistance you gave her." His mouth tightened. "Such assistance, however, will not be necessary again, Mr. Grant."

Jase stiffened, but he could see the appeal for silence in Deborah's eyes and said nothing. He stood there watching her walk away, followed closely by Amos Terry. Now there was no doubt about his dislike of this man.

He could still taste the sweetness of her lips. Excitement churned through him again, multiplied a thousand times since he'd met Deborah. There'd been many girls in Jase's life, but the girl he'd waited for had been like a dream, just as the big ranch had been. And, now, he'd found the girl!

The bearded man crusted with mud was eyeing him. "Thanks for savin' me from doing something terrible. Just terrible." He shuddered. "Maybe got me hung. I was sure feeling frisky to want to spill Miss Reynolds in the mud. Holy gee." After a minute he added, "You sure made yourself a big enemy, mister. Yes, siree, you did."

"Who is he?"

"It's kind of a long story." He wet his lips. "My parched throat wouldn't hold out for the telling." His bloodshot eyes actually achieved a twinkle. "I know a terrible dump that'll let me in lookin' like this. Until I can get me a new shirt and pants," he suggested slyly.

Jase laughed. "You win."

Without waiting for a second invitation the man rushed ahead and Jase followed still half grinning. Things happened fast in San Francisco. Even love.

The man called over his shoulder, "Name of Slim."

"Jase here."

They went along Pacific street, then Slim cut into an alley and turned into a cellar dive. "You're right in the heart of the Barbary Coast," Slim

whispered. "You're safe in here with me, I think." He shrugged. "Hell, you can only die once."

A MAN WAS beating out a tune on a battered piano and a huge woman stood behind the bar, a hickory wagon-spoke close to her right hand, conveniently handy for breaking heads. She eyed Jase coldly before she turned to Slim.

"Two beers," he ordered. "This is Jase, my new boss, Sal." After a minute she nodded briefly and slapped two enormous mugs of beer on the bar.

Jase shoved out money. "Can you fix Slim up with some clean pants and a shirt?"

She thought about it, then bellowed something to someone and in a few minutes a girl brought a pair of trousers and a red shirt. They were far from new, but at least Slim could walk into some better place than this in them. Without a word he carried them into a curtained alcove while Jase paid the hundred dollars asked.

He stood drinking his beer, his tall lithe body poised for trouble from any direction. But the only thing that came was Slim looking almost clean. Somehow, he'd even managed to get the mud out of his whiskers.

"Let's have the story on Amos Terry." Jase smiled. "My new enemy."

"He's a big lawyer working with powerful men. He fixes up deeds and settles mining claims, stuff like that. He's aiming to be sheriff. There's no salary to the job, but he'd be entitled to a certain proportion of the fees collected and the fees usually exceed fifty thousand a year. The mayor and Amos are just like that." Slim crossed two fingers. "He's awful big and powerful, Jase. And mean. I saw you look at Miss Deborah." He grinned slyly. "And so did Amos. Her pa owns the huge Buena Vista Ranch in Sacramento Valley and Amos won't only get *her* when they marry. I reckon if you was to get in Amos' way, you be smashed like a small bug."

"I don't smash easy." Jase grinned. "Nor do I scare. Where do you fit into all this?"

Slim scratched a finger through his whiskers. "Mining. I struck me a rich pocket up around Sutter's Fort and I sure raised me a lot of hell in the fancy dancy halls with my nuggets. Only the pocket petered out and I'm hanging around broke trying to get another stake together. I know a place." He stopped and shook his head. "That gold sure is a siren. Look, Jase." There was a feverish glint in his eyes. "Maybe you and me could go partners. I know a place where there's gold, honest."

Jase laughed. "Not me. I'm satisfied with the gold I can take over my counters. Let the others dig it up." He finished his beer. "I've got to find a store. Where did you say Deborah was staying here in San Francisco?"

"At Amos'. Her and her pa." He hesitated, then finished his own beer. "My throat's still parched, but I'll tag along. I know most everybody here and maybe I can keep 'em from gouging out your eyes."

Jase looked at Slim steadily and decided that Slim was for him. He'd made a friend and he needed someone who knew the ropes. "If you want to work for me for a while maybe we can fix up that stake for you."

"Oh," Slim said airly, "I'm already workin' for you. I got to work out my pants." He chuckled, flipped a ribald

remark to Sal and they walked out into the fresh air.

TWO HOURS later, Jase knew that Slim was almost literally worth his weight in gold dust. Left alone without Slim's advice he would have signed a lease on a store for a fabulous sum that was going to be torn down in two months, with none of Jase's advanced rental returned. Finally Slim took him to a small place whose owner was giving up after having dumped a ship load of tacks into the Bay. Once tacks had been in such heavy demand for fastening muslin partitions in the shacks that a pound of tacks sold for a pound of gold. But that was in the past and the merchant couldn't give them away today.

Slim arranged for porters and boats and supervised bringing in the goods while Jase stayed behind to unpack them as soon as they reached his new store. Long before the job was finished the place was jammed with eager customers and gold was pouring across his counters.

"Let's eat," Jase finally said.

"Fremont House has good grub," Slim told him. "Maybe you can get a room there."

They were walking down the street in the bright sunshine when a strikingly beautiful girl with enormous black eyes, and hair as black as Jase's, stopped Slim. She was looking at Jase.

"I don't know you all cleaned up." She laughed, but her eyes still watched Jase, liking, frankly, what she saw.

"I'll be dirty again," Slim told her happily. "Julie, this is Jase Grant."

She held out her hand and her fingers pressed hard against his. And lingered there. There were gaudy beads around her neck and her garnet colored silk dress rustled faintly when she moved.

"Come see me, stranger." She smiled. "You'll find me singing or at a roulette table in the Bella Union." She smiled again and Jase noticed that it was a tired one. "Maybe tonight?"

"Tonight," he agreed, "Slim and I will come to see you."

She laughed. "Then you stay clean, Slim. Maybe you'll even shave off those whiskers." She touched Slim's arm as she walked by them.

"Aw, no, Julie," he groaned. "Don't make me." He turned and watched her. "She's an awful good kid," he said quietly. "Awful good. Her pa had a claim next to mine in the gold fields. Some hoodlums jumped it and killed her old man and she was left without a dime. By the time I sobered up she'd left and I finally found her here working for the Bella trying to get together a stake." He scratched his whiskers ruefully. "By then I was broke too and I couldn't give her passage on a boat to her ma's folks in Boston."

Jase wasn't listening. Deborah was standing across the muddy street in front of the Fremont House, glaring at him. He could almost see the flash of anger in her lovely eyes.

"Come on," he told Slim and ploughed through the mud. Before he could reach her, Amos and a white haired tanned old gentleman joined her and the three of them turned up the hotel steps. She held her head arrogantly as she cut Jason cold.

Just as they were entering the door Amos turned and looked down at Jase, his lips twisted into a contemptuous smile. "Isn't that the bum, Deborah, who tried to up-root the plank before Mr. Grant rescued you?"

She stared at them, not the slightest sign of recognition in her eyes as they swept over Jase. "Yes," she said coldly. "Slim."

"It was a put up job, my dear" Amos informed her smugly. "You can see the two of them are cronies. Arranged so Mr. Grant could meet you. A cheap trick, my dear."

"That ain't so," Slim yelled. "I was feeling frisky, Miss Deborah, and Jase saved me fror a terrible thing. But you," he shook his fist at the tall handsome man who smiled at them sardonically.

"Quiet," Jase said. "I'll attend to this later. Let's get dinner."

2

JASE deliberately got a table in the dining room so that Deborah faced him. He let himself admire her extravagantly while she became more annoyed and embarrassed, her face going from white to red and back again in her effort to keep Amos from realizing what was going on behind him. That would teach her not to cut him, Jase thought happily. Especially, when he'd done nothing.

Always Jase had believed that love was nothing a man had to study about, or work out. The kind of love he wanted for the rest of his life was the kind that bowled him over with such suddenness and intensity that there could be no mistake, no doubt. The kind he'd felt when Deborah had started across the plank this morning. As long as she wasn't married to Amos he still had a chance. He could try to win her for his own.

He remembered the way her arm had tightened around his neck and the fragrance of her auburn hair. He remembered the warmth of her mouth when his lips lightly touched it and that kindling of something in her deep gray eyes. He looked across at her. She was as conscious of him as he was of her.

"Say you ain't listening," Slim complained. "I'm jawin' away here at a great rate and you're mooning over at Deborah. And that isn't all you're doing." He shook his head reprovingly. "You're also flirting with quick death. Amos keeps what's his own." After a moment he added, "You got a gun?"

"Sure. Two of them."

"Know how to use 'em real well?" Slim demanded earnestly.

"Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not. Buckle on the guns, Jase. The kind of toughs Amos can hire fight with knives, brass knuckles and wagon spokes. And they fight in gangs."

Jase grinned. "You scare me to death," he mocked. "I can fight too."

"Not this way. You don't know nothin' about it. And you never will know because you'll be dead if you don't leave Amos' girl alone." Slim dropped his eyes to his place and began eating.

Jase let Deborah leave the dining room first. He loved the way she held her slim shoulders and the high flight of her auburn head. Even her chin was up disdainfully. It was wonderful and he wondered what she'd do if he took her into his arms and really kissed that haughty indifference away?

Out by the desk, Jase noticed the white haired gentleman ambling toward the bar. "That her father?" he asked quickly.

"Yep. Cyrus Reynolds and one of the best cattlemen around." Admiration lit Slim's eyes. "You ought to see the ranch he has. Inside the house you'd think you were back in New York. Real fine."

"Meet me at the store." Jase nodded briefly and went into the bar.

This was probably a bold approach, but Jase was not the man to pussyfoot. He liked action because that was what he understood. He walked to Mr. Reynolds.

"Sir, I'm Jason Grant and I owe you an explanation. Amos didn't have it quite straight." Cyrus Reynolds studied him for a long moment and there was a lurking twinkle in his eyes when he nodded and turned back to his drink.

Jase explained exactly what had happened about the plank, even to the dive where he'd brought clean clothes for Slim. The only thing he didn't tell was about that brief kiss that had made him fall in love.

"Slim's right, he does get frisky. A good man though." He smiled. "Deb-

by's capricious. Maybe a little spoiled."

They talked ranching after that and Jase found himself pouring out his dreams to sympathetic ears. He listened respectfully to the older man's knowledge gained from years of experience.

"You're welcome at the Buena Vista. Come and look at our valley, there's big acreage lying north of us you might like. Welcome any time." As Mr. Reynolds turned to leave, he said quietly, "Debby likes her men dressed up, son."

Jase grinned and felt a nice warm glow that Mr. Reynolds liked him. "Thank you, sir. My clothes will be unpacked at once."

"We leave tomorrow for the ranch." Mr. Reynolds told him.

Jase's face tightened with disappointment after the old man had left the bar. Then the invitation to visit the Buena Vista wiped it out. If the goods sold rapidly, there'd be plenty of time for a long visit before the next ship brought in more goods. Time enough even for Deborah to love him.

Walking out into the street he thought of Amos' anger when he learned that Jase was visiting the ranch and felt fine.

AT THE STORE he found that Slim had left a friend of his guarding the goods and had gone to the clipper for Jase's personal rawhide trunks. He decided to expedite things by joining Slim and hurried down Pacific street as fast as the slimy mud would allow. He had just about reached the small wharf when he saw a man sprawled in the mud, groaning as he tried to climb to his feet. There was something familiar about the cut of the whiskers. Jase hurried to him.

"Slim," he shouted and hauled him to his feet. Slim's face was cut and bleeding, one eye was almost closed and he would have fallen if Jase hadn't been holding him up.

There was one of San Francisco's hundreds of saloons and gambling houses across the street and Jase slung Slim across his back and ploughed over to it.

"Brandy," he yelled to the surly faced bartender. "Fast."

Carefully he propped Slim in a chair and held him upright until he could get the brandy down his throat. Slim shuddered and opened his good eye. After a moment, recognition came into it and he managed a grin.

"Some scurvy rats jumped me from behind and like to beat hell out of me." After a third glass of brandy he felt fine. He looked down at his muddy trousers ruefully. "I might have known I couldn't keep the blasted things clean. I'll be working for you the rest of my life just for pants."

Jase was thoughtful. He was reasonably sure that the handsome arrogant Amos Terry was responsible for this. Amos had seen Slim with him this noon, of course, when he informed Deborah they were cronies and that Jase had put on an act with the plank just so he could meet her. When Amos' hoodlums couldn't find Jase, they'd attacked his man Slim as a warning. There was no way to prove it right now, but he would, before he was through. Before the end he'd prove plenty about the smug assured Amos. A feeling of exultation ran through Jase, because Amos must fear him with Deborah or he'd not try to warn him away.

"Can you make it to the hotel, Slim?" he asked.

"I started out after your danged

trunks and I'm goin' to get 'em.' Slim looked grim. "I'm tough. Only I'm carrying a gun from here on. And the next son who jumps me is going to get a bullet right through his guts."

"If you don't put it there I will," Jase promised and his eyes were icy blue.

Up in his room at the Fremont House, Jase unpacked a suit of gray broad cloth and a fancy embroidered waist coat. He dressed very carefully, trying not to muss his pleated white shirt. His boots were highly polished and two ivory handled guns hung low on his thighs.

"Well, if you ain't the picture of a gentleman," Slim said admiringly from the bed. "I don't feel so funny in this suit, I guess." He glanced down at the black broadcloth Jase had given him. Then he sighed deeply. "Let's borrow your razor. I guess I'll lose me my whiskers just like Julie said."

Jase laughed and gave it to him. "You sure those two friends of yours will guard my store?"

"Them?" Slim snorted. "Those buzzards shoot first and then ask." Through his good eye he watched Jase put on a broad brimmed black hat. "If I get the nerve when my face's all naked I'll drop by the Bella and show off to Julie."

"I'll tell her." Jase smiled and walked down the flight of stairs.

STANDING in front of the dining room doors, her gray eyes widening when she saw him, was Deborah. He watched the faint blush that crept into her oval face and liked the way she bit her lower lip in vexation when he swept off his hat.

"Good-evening." He smiled down at her and his eyes laughed joyously. "I hope you're waiting for me?" He held his arm for her and watched her freeze.

"Don't you speak to me." Her eyes blazed. "Go on out and find that, that girl Julie to talk to."

His eyes hardened. "She's a nice kid," he said evenly. "She's doing the best she can to get a stake. She's had bad luck. Maybe she's not doing it your way, Deborah, but she's doing it."

"I suppose that drunken Slim told you that?" Her scorn was like the quick lash of a whip. "It's an insult to have a man like you speak to me. Amos said that and he's right."

"You don't mean that, any of it," he told her softly. "You want to be back in my arms as much as I want you to be. And next time, Debby, I'll really kiss you."

Crimson flooded her face and he could see the pulse in her throat beat wildly. But before she could explode with anger her father said pleasantly, "Hello, son."

"Good evening, sir."

The old man's eyes glanced over him and there was a perceptible twinkle in them. He nodded his head slightly in approval. "Very dressy gentlemen, these New Yorkers, Deborah. I'm stopping at your store for goods before we leave in the morning, Jase."

"Thank you, sir." His eyes twinkled too. "I have some beautiful white silk Deborah will want, I'm sure."

"I'll want nothing from you. Ever." She whirled and almost stormed into the dining room. Her father chuckled softly as he followed her.

Jase stood there for a moment watching her easy, graceful walk. He loved the fire in her and the temper that matched the red in her hair. A man would never find life dull with Deborah because she'd give such a zest to it. She needed a man who'd love her above all else and who was tough enough to fight his own battles and who didn't send hoodlum gangs to fight them for him. This beautiful girl of fire was the one he wanted and loved. A girl who'd be worth winning against heavy odds. Jase never felt happier in his life than when he walked out into the street.

The gambling saloons were lit up

like New Year's Eve. Since there were countless ones in San Francisco it wasn't surprising. Jase set out for the Bella Union, Slim had told him it was the most popular ever operated on the Barbary Coast. It had been destroyed several times by great fires, but it had always risen again, a beacon for the young bloods. It was here that the first minstrel show in San Francisco was given. And here fun and frolic abided. The street dodgers handed out, not only promised it, but the Bella fulfilled it. Most of the professional entertainers, singers like Julie, were paid enough to live comfortably and it was here that the famous Lotta Crabtree got her start.

The orchestra was playing loudly when Jase walked into the large bar. The men were well dressed, even to plug hats, and some eyed his gray broadcloth with envy.

AFTER HE'D had a drink and made general talk about San Francisco, he by-passed the small theater where a girl sang, since she wasn't Julie. She was singing a plantive number with a line of beauties in short skirts behind her and Jase smiled. He went on through to the roulette, twenty-one and fantan room.

Almost immediately he saw Julie at a roulette table. Her flaming red dress, off her creamy shoulders, was beautiful with her ebony hair. She was smiling up at Amos Terry. An alive Amos, whose laughter was joyous and whose eyes had a sparkle. In all fairness, the man was handsome with a definite charm when he forgot to be smug.

A sudden stabbing pain hurt through Jase. This so very easily could explain Deborah's resentment about Julie, her acute hatred. She could know that Amos was interested in the beautiful black haired girl. And it only meant, then, that Deborah was wildly jealous because of Amos.

Before Jase could turn and walk out of the room, Julie caught his eye and smiled. The frown on Amos' face was thick and black, his mouth hard. A man, Jase thought as he walked to the roulette table, with too little self control.

"You came, Jase," Julie said and there was a warm glow in her black eyes.

"Of course." Jase smiled before he turned to Amos. "Your boys didn't quite finish their job this afternoon, or were they meant to?"

Amos flushed angrily. "I don't know what you mean. But I do mean this—you've been in San Francisco for one day and you've successfully managed not only to annoy me, but the girl I'm going to marry." Julie spontaneously put her hand on his arm and his face changed with his smile. "All right, since Julie likes you, I'll give you a chance. It amounts to that because I have power here. There's a boat leaving tomorrow for New York, you be on it." For an instant he looked as mean as Slim had said, and far more dangerous.

Jase threw back his curly head and laughed delightedly. "You're crazy, Amos. Power crazy." Then his eyes were blue steel. "No man gives me orders. And it will be Deborah who tells me I annoy her, not you." He ignored Amos' blazing anger. "Julie, some hoodlums beat up Slim this afternoon. He's all right," he added quickly at her sharp intake of breath. "He only has a black eye and a few other things. I think he's sick right now," he grinned, "because he's shaving off his whiskers."

Her laughter was low and charming, like a cool fresh brook. "I can't believe it." She tucked her hand under Amos' arm. "I have to sing, try your luck at the table, Jase." Her soft voice held a curious urgency.

"I'm sure my luck is in." He bowed as she turned away with Amos.

His luck had to be in, he decided

bitterly, since Deborah was jealous of Amos' obvious regard for Julie. Deborah's hatred for the girl had burned there in her gray eyes. It was a cold final thing. It meant that Amos was the man Deborah loved. And since the world began, the old superstition persists that unlucky in love, lucky in cards.

Without thought, Jase stacked gold coins on the number thirteen. It won. His numbers kept winning. Men watched when Jase finally spilled the stacks into a canvas bag and turned to leave the table. He didn't give a damn about winning. All that mattered was that the old superstition had proven right—unlucky at love...

He was pushing his way through the crowd when he saw Julie hurrying toward him.

"Be careful," she whispered urgently. "Please be careful." She looked straight into his eyes and added, "They're going to get you, Jase."

"Any time. Any place." Then the hardness left his mouth and he smiled. "Thanks, honey."

HE STEPPED out into the loud night. It was still New Year's Eve. Jase unfastened his coat and shifted the holster to make sure of his lightning fast draw. If some of Amos' men stopped him, or jumped him from behind, he might die but he'd take some along with him.

A man couldn't walk afraid, so Jase stepped out. He heard footsteps behind him, but they stayed the same distance like innocent men walking home. A shadow darted into an alley, but it disappeared along all the other shadows. Nothing happened. No one attacked.

It wasn't until Jase almost reached the Fremont House that he realized what a damn fool he'd been and laughed. After what he'd said in front of Julie to Amos, no hoodlums would attack him tonight.

Hell, he could take care of himself in a rough and tumble with three men; and with a gun, maybe five, but not a gang.

He stopped in the Fremont bar to get a bottle of brandy and food for Slim. Slim was in his own room, a gun in his hand when Jase followed orders and walked in.

Jase stared and then laughed until his sides ached. Slim growled like a sore bear as he jerked the brandy, uncorked it and let it pour down his throat. Slim's face looked like a patch of unripe strawberries where he'd shaved off his beard. His closed eye resembled a puffy rainbow.

"Go on laugh." He gurgled more liquor. "I'm a lush," he said proudly. After a moment he added very quietly, "Maybe because no one gives a damn what I do. Maybe I'm tired of lone-wolfing it." His good eye suddenly got fierce. "Say, you didn't tell Julie I shaved the beard?"

It meant so much more to him than Jase had thought that he temporized. "She was with Amos." That, at least, wasn't a lie. He listened while Slim cursed magnificiently, then he pulled out his roulette winnings and dumped them by Slim's side on the bed. "Here's your stake."

His good eye blinked fast and got suspiciously moist. "Well, dad-blame, partners." He said it huskily and his handclasp was strong. "That dirty old empty money belt I got to wear now is sure going to make my new pants hang wrong." He chuckled as he started filling the belt. Suddenly, he looked at Jase sharply. "Men just don't have your luck in this town when Amos hates their guts. You be careful. Amos wants Deborah and in a showdown he'll fight you himself, if his boys miss getting you." He looked down at the gold. "And they must have missed you tonight when you walked back here."

"Yeah," Jase smiled grimly as he closed the door and went to his own room.

The thing that made him ache was that Deborah loved Amos enough to be jealous of Julie. Really loved him. That was the hard part. The really tough part.

3

ALL THE goods were unpacked the next morning because Jase was at his store at dawn and Slim's two guards pitched in and helped. By seven-thirty business was pouring in and the gold was filling the big black strong box under the counter. It was necessary for Jase to clear a path when Deborah and her father came in.

She stood against the back counter, beautiful in her cold haughtiness and anger. She ignored Jase, waiting with obvious boredom and impatience until her father bought his goods and arranged for them to be packed immediately in one of his wagons. Then she saw the bolt of white silk, beautiful silk for a wedding dress, and she couldn't quite help the quick intake of breath. Jase watched her.

Actually, he didn't know quite why he brought that bolt of silk from New York. It had been his only foolish purchase. But looking at Deborah now, he knew it must have been for her wedding gown. Some trick of Fate had made him bring it to her. Even if she wouldn't wear it for him.

Jase spoke to one of his helpers and when Deborah turned away the man took it and wrapped it. Surreptitiously, the silk was placed in Mr. Reynolds goods and Deborah would find it at the Buena Vista.

"Coming, Debby," Mr. Reynolds finally said.

"Of course." But she waited until her father started out of the little store and then turned to Jase. "Don't you dare come to the ranch. Don't ever come." Her gray eyes flashed. "If you do Amos will kill you. Or I will."

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked and his eyes held hers. "Or of yourself?" He wanted to reach out and pull her into his arms, he wanted to kiss her until her angry mouth grew warm and eager beneath his. His hunger for her was all there in his eyes and she flushed, the pulse beating wildly in her throat. "Or are you afraid of real love, Deborah?" he asked very quietly.

"Not your kind of cheap love. The kind you give Julie." She flung the words at him as she turned away.

"You're jealous of her." He laughed a little harshly. "You can't trust the man you're planning to marry very much if you're this jealous of another girl."

Her face whitened. "You fool. You stupid, stupid fool." There was bitterness in her voice before she whirled and worked her way through the crowd of customers.

For a moment, Jase stood there. Maybe he was a fool to love a girl who wanted Amos Terry. Maybe he was a stupid fool. Finally, he shrugged and plunged into business.

IT WAS WHILE Jase was having his noon dinner at the Fremont House alone, since Slim wouldn't appear until his face looked better, that someone yelled Fire! Jase was one of the first men in the street.

He sucked in a long breath, his eyes as hot as the fire that was destroying his store.

He shoved through the line of the bucket brigade at his blazing door front. Slim's two friends might be caught inside. The acrid smoke choked Jase and stung his eyes. The men weren't in here, nor was the black strong box. He was afraid to open the back door leading out to the alley for fear of creating a draft that would

make the place a burning inferno. Choking and coughing, Jase pushed his way out into the street and walked fast to the alley.

Slim's friends sprawled in the mud. After a brief examination he found they weren't dead, only conked out. Without being told Jase knew that somehow they'd both been decoyed out here and smashed on the back of their heads. He pulled them to one side and stood there.

This was it. At best he could sell some of his goods for salvage, but the smoke and fire had destroyed thousands of dollars worth of merchandise. And his black strong box almost filled with gold was gone. Deborah was as far away as the stars now, because Amos would push their marriage, urging that she set an early date. He'd feel that another suitor without money wasn't anything much to fear. And maybe he was so right.

The only thing Amos didn't know was that another shipment of goods would arrive soon. But that could be much too late for Jase to hope to have a chance to win Deborah. At best it would only have been a chance, since she loved Amos enough to be wildly jealous of Julie. Hell, if he'd only had sense enough to have emptied the gold out of his box before he went to dinner, but he'd been dreaming of Deborah and grown careless. This ought to teach any man to keep his mind strictly on his business.

After Jase got a couple of men to carry Slim's unconscious friends to the hotel, he walked around to the front of his store. An occasional flame was still licking around the charred front. A grim faced Slim was hurling buckets of water as fast as he could jerk them out of men's hands. His clothes were drenched, but he didn't seem to even notice it; there was cold fury in his good eye.

Jase took his arm and pulled him away. "Forget it," he said. "We're burned out." He grimaced, remembering Deborah's words. "Like a fool, a stupid, stupid fool I left the gold inside and they stole it."

"It was my pals who were suckered out into that alley. It's my honor that's at stake." Slim wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Dad-blame it, I thought those guys were smart. Then they go fall for the oldest trick in the book, a suspicious noise in an alley." He spat disgustedly. "I ought to go kill myself."

Somehow Slim's despair lightened Jase's own bitter disappointment and he grinned. "It's not as bad as you think. At least," he amended it, "things will be all right when my next ship gets in."

A small man pushed through and without ceremony began digging into boxes of hardware and tobacco in the store. When Jase loomed over him, he explained that he'd give five hundred dollars in gold for the lot. Battered, charred or not, the immigrants in Oregon City would pay fantastic prices for it when the little man's wagons reached there. Jase didn't argue; he just accepted the money and walked out of his store.

When he reached his room Slim was trying to wring out his pants; he'd tossed his money belt on Jase's bed. "Take back your money, boss. You need it for yourself now. Anyhow, we're partners." He tried to mop his shirt with a towel and looked sheepish when Jase sighed deeply and dug out another pair of pants for him. "When I'm old and bald I'll still be owing you for these things. I saw those dumb friends of mine and outside of a cou-

ple of cracked heads they're all right. It was like I figured, they heard a lot of shooting in the alley and busted out to investigate. Suckers."

JASE TOOK half his roulette winnings and left the rest for Slim. He'd never had a friend he liked as much as this crazy man, whom Deborah had called a drunken bum. Slim, he suspected, might do foolish things before they were through, but he'd never do a mean one.

Jase built a cigarette, frowning thoughtfully. The fire was doubtless Amos' second move to warn him away from Deborah. He'd struck fast after she undoubtedly had told him her father had invited Jase to Buena Vista. Last night at the Bella Amos had gone so far as to order him out on the next boat.

A man can't win a girl by thinking about her from miles away. If he wants her badly enough he has to go where she is. Jase smiled and there was a sudden glow in his blue eyes.

"Buy horses, Slim. We're riding to the Buena Vista." There was an exultant note in his voice now that his decision was made.

Slim watched him through narrowed eyes. "You're sure asking for it, boss. Amos just ain't going to like that idea at all. No, siree, he ain't."

"Tough. I'm going to see Amos now and have a showdown about that fire and your beating." Jase's hand unconsciously dropped to his gun.

"But you don't know for sure that Amos did it. We ain't got proof. Not a smidge." Slim's face wrinkled with worry. "Amos is a power here with the packing of big friends. You're a stranger with just me and Julie for you. If you and Amos are going to fight this out, let's have the fight someplace in Sacremento Valley. Where the cards aren't stacked against us. Let's not deliberately go out to be ambushed from a dirty alley." He grinned. "I'd kinda like to die where it's dry and not wallow in mud like a hog." He thought of something. "Say, boss, you know a giant, a bully named Billy?"

Jase threw back his head and howled with laughter, remembering how he'd tossed Billy into the water yesterday when he'd tried to hold Jase up for more money. He told Slim and watched him shake his wonderment. "Why?" Jase asked.

"I heard he was hanging around the store this morning. He'd do something like setting that fire and stealing your money. Of course," he stratched his shaven jaw, "he could be working for Amos. I reckon it'll all come out before we're through. I'll get horses and grub and we'll light out in the dark of the evening. I'll slip around to the Bella now and say goodbye to Julie." He looked sheepish.

"Ask her not to tell Amos we've gone until tomorrow."

"Sure." Slim rubbed his shaven face ruefully as he left.

Jase packed, taking only the necessities, then he changed into homespun trousers tucked into high laced boots and pulled on a woolen shirt. The broadcloth and the white tucked shirts would have to remain behind.

He was oiling his guns when there was an uncertain tap on his door. He moved with the grace of a big cat, so that he'd be behind the door when it opened, guns in his hands. Then he called to come on in.

Julie came into the room. She whirled when he chuckled and kicked the door shut with his heel.

"It wasn't a good welcome, Julie." He smiled. "But I'm not too sure of my visitors." He shoved the guns into their holsters.

She moved to him and put her hands on his arms, her dark eyes seemed enormous.

"Slim just told me you're riding to Deborah's." She looked beautiful in her rustling silk dress and her cute little bonnet. "Amos can be dangerous

if he thinks a man's trying to take something that already belongs to him." Her face tightened a little. "Oh, Jase, be careful." She reached up and kissed his lips.

His arms tightened around her and his mouth hardened on hers. Her slender pliant body moved closer to his and her own arms held him. She was desirable and Jase forgot everything but their long kiss.

He looked down at her finally and the blood pounded through him. "I'm sorry," he said huskily.

"I'm not. I wanted it." She buried her head against him. "Jase, do you have to love her?"

He didn't answer for a long time and then his voice was curiously gentle. "I'm afraid I do, Julie." His hands tightened on her. "Let me send you back to Boston on the next ship."

She moved away from him as if he'd struck her, her black eyes burning into his. "I give my kisses, I don't sell them. The Bella pays me enough to live and save a little. I was ridiculous to come here. Go get killed, who cares?" She was gone before he could reply.

It was then Jase remembered that Slim loved this girl and that he'd double-crossed his friend. A slow burn reddened his lean cheek.

IT WAS DARK when they rode out of San Francisco and hit the road toward the valley and the Buena Vista. Slim had managed to find good horses and they traveled fast and light.

The moon sailed high and as the bushes and trees cast ominous shadows Slim kept up his spirits by relating the terror tales of the Murieta outlaw band. Right along this way they robbed stage coaches and travelers, they fired settlements and murdered. Each time their horses shied away from a particularly crouching shadow, Slim hoped piously that it wasn't the bandit chief.

Jase wasn't as interested as Slim expected and so finally he gave up and the two men rode through the night in silence. They slowed down to cross a stream and Jase turned in his saddle.

"Slim, Julie came to my room to warn us about Amos. I kissed her and I'm damn sorry." He could see Slim stiffen.

After a while he said, "It's all right." There was a tinge of bitterness in Slim's voice. "I'm the one who does the loving, she doesn't love me any. Maybe I just hang around in case she'll ever need me." He touched his spurs to his horse and Jase cursed himself for a double-crosser.

It was just before dawn when they stopped to rest their horses at a wayside inn. It was evening again when they rode. About sundown on the third day they pulled up at a cross-roads settlement, one road leading to the gold fields and the other toward the mountains and the Buena Vista.

"It ain't far now to the ranch," Slim said. "Want to lay over here at the Inn and ride there in the morning?"

The eagerness in Jase to see Deborah couldn't be stilled. He would have been like a caged lion if he'd had to spend the night here, knowing she was only a few miles away from him.

"Let's ride," he told Slim.

"And me parched," he grumbled.

The distant mountains looked dark and hazy against the flat dry land. Soon they found fences and saw herds of sleek fat cattle grazing. After several miles Slim turned them through a gate and they could see the whitewashed out-buildings and the ranch house beneath live oaks, cool in the evening light.

There was a fierce pounding through Jase's temples as he drew closer to Deborah. The corrals and bunk houses were on the right and beyond them a wide brook lined with willows. A

trumpet vine covered the gallery of the ranch house and in a minute now, she'd come and stand there. Even if anger flashed in her eyes, she'd still be standing before him.

Jase swung off his horse and after a minute Slim followed.

Mr. Reynolds came out on the gallery and raised his hand in welcome. "Delight to see you boys at Buena Vista." There was a nice warmth in his voice. "One of the men will take your horse, Slim."

"I'll bring along our saddle bags." Slim ducked toward the corrals.

Inside, the big house was plainly but comfortably furnished with flowers in bright bowls. Debby's touch, Mr. Reynolds explained proudly and Jase wondered if the nice old man could hear his heart thump.

They talked about the ranch and they went to the windows so that Jase could look out at the mountains and the great tract of land that lay there, a ranch that could be bought cheaply and built up.

"Come, Debby, and welcome our new guest."

Jase wheeled at the sound of Mr. Reynolds' voice and then froze. Standing beside Deborah, a satisfied smile on his face, was Amos Terry. Possessively, he put his hand on the girl's arm and drew her closer to his side.

"I rode faster, not stopping so often nor so long as you." Amos smiled again. "Perhaps my urge to see Deborah was much greater than yours, Jase."

She looked coolly at Jase. "Your only urge was to see my father's ranch. I'm very sure of that."

He knew the color whipped his face, but there was nothing he could say. After Slim came, she graciously showed them to their room, making very sure that she kept distance between herself and Jase. She made a point of being gladder to see Slim than him, and he wished to hell he'd never come. Only the dream of a ranch kept him from riding out into the night.

SUPPER wasn't as difficult as Jase expected and no man could take exception to Deborah's cool courtesy, every inch of her slender body was her father's hostess. No man but Jase.

"You sold your goods quickly." He couldn't tell what her smile meant.

"Not very. I burned down." Briefly he told them about the fire as he watched Amos.

Amos only shrugged. "I suppose you suspect that I caused it, even as you accused me of being behind Slim's accident." His handsome face hardened. "San Francisco is a rough place right now where only the strong can hope to survive. It's no place for weaklings."

Jase shoved back his chair. "Get up," he ordered and there was a wild reckless glint in his eyes. "Let's take a walk, Amos. Just you and I alone, without any of your gang."

Deborah rose quickly. "We'll all take a walk." Her head was arrogant when she spoke to Jase. "Gentlemen don't try to fight in my father's house."

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly.

"Maybe we'd be a mite safer, Miss Debby, if we all turned our guns over to your father. Amos' too," Slim drawled. "That way Jase and I won't get shot in the back."

"Father," she shouted, her eyes blazing. "Does my future husband have to be insulted by these men?"

"I expect Amos can take care of himself," Mr. Reynolds told her calmly, but there was a suspicion of a twinkle deep in his eyes. "We'll ask you to excuse us, Debby, while we talk ranching."

Try as hard as he did, Jase never did remember much about their talk

that night. All he could think of was Deborah's nearness and her obvious dislike. The sound of her lovely laughter filtered in from the gallery. It was late when they went to bed, but sleep was as illusive as Deborah and Jase finally got up and slipped back into his clothes.

He went out quietly to the gallery and sat down on the broad steps staring out into the moonlight. When he heard a faint rustle behind him he was on his feet in one easy motion, a gun in his hand.

"Don't shoot," Deborah said softly. "I thought I heard someone come out here." She sat down on the steps and, after a moment, he sat beside her.

"And thought it was Amos," he said curtly.

She thought about it and he could see her smile in the moonlight. "No, I wanted it to be you."

"Oh, Deborah," he whispered and caught her up in his arms.

She pushed hard against him. "Don't. I wanted to beg you to go away from here. Amos hates you and he's jealous. I don't want trouble." Her deep gray eyes seemed to shine. "Please go away."

"I love you," he told her softly. "I've loved you from the moment I held you in my arms and walked across that plank. I've always been waiting for you, I think." His hands tightened on her, "You felt it too. Just as you do now."

"I don't." She tried desperately to pull away from him. "Ride back to your girl, to Julie."

He laughed softly as he kissed her. She fought him, her lips stiff and cold against his, until at last they quivered into warm life and kissed him back. Her body relaxed and his kiss grew gentler in its urgency. A kiss that gave a man's heart with it.

Her breath caught in her throat when she pulled out of his arms. "I hate you for that." She half sobbed as she sprang to her feet. "I hate you like hell."

She was like a shaft of soft moonlight as she slipped into the big silent house. Jase sat and smoked, not trying to stem the pounding excitement through him. Life with Deborah would never be dull. She was like fire.

4

SLIM HAD them in their saddles before dawn the next day. They cut for miles across the Buena Vista until they came to the land Mr. Reynolds had told them about. They followed broken fences for other miles until they saw a cluster of dilapadated buildings.

"This fellow must sure want to turn this place over to the buzzards." Slim laughed.

Bill Johnston was discouraged and willing to sell for cash. He wanted out and he needed money to get back east. He wouldn't give an option and he wouldn't wait for his money. It was right now with him.

"Someone will come along with cash," he said and Jase agreed.

"This could be a fine place if a man had gumption," Slim said as they rode away.

"And money," Jase laughed bitterly. This morning he'd thought nothing could lick him. Now, he knew Johnston wasn't waiting for any shipment of goods to come around the Horn and be sold. Deborah wouldn't have him probably, but he had nothing to offer her right now even if she would.

They wound around through the hills until they were back at the settlement at the cross-roads and Jase grinned as he eyed Slim sternly. "That was clever. Of course you didn't know we'd end up at the saloon."

"A man sure gets a parched throat," Slim agreed happily.

At the hitching post in front of the Inn a team of blacks were tied and Jase saw the Buena Vista painted on

the wagon. Deborah might be here with her father and he didn't even try to stop the tingling that spun down his spine. They swung off their horses and tied them, Jase looked around for some clue to where Deborah might be. Then he started, his eyes narrowing in surprise, as he heard his name called in a low voice above him.

Julie was leaning out an upstairs window in the Inn, motioning them to be quiet and come up. The urgency in her was apparent and he jabbed Slim in the ribs before he could yell for joy.

There was no time to look for Deborah and with her dislike of Julie, she'd never speak to him again if she found Julie here. That was foolish, he decided. It was that damn Amos she was jealous of. Sometimes women simply didn't make any sense.

Deborah, looking beautfiul in a gray dress that matched her eyes, was sitting in the Inn's big public room. And the stairs led up to the second floor from it. There was no way Julie could get out without walking right past Deborah. Jase said a quick and fervent prayer that Julie would stay up where she was.

For the first time Deborah seemed faintly glad to see him. He discussed the ranch he'd just seen with Mr. Reynolds and explained that he didn't have the cash to swing the deal. Out of one corner of his eye he watched Slim, the fool, drift upstairs. Finally, Deborah and her father left and Jase let out his breath and took the stairs two at a time.

Slim was looking at Julie and all of his love for her was right there in his eyes. It was nothing another man should see and Jase began to figure how he could leave.

Julie smiled at him for just a minute before she tucked her hand under Slim's arm. It was a strange smile, a little sad.

She'd come by stage to tell them that Amos had sworn to kill Jase if he found him at the ranch. *He'd* not do it. *His* hands would be clean. But his men had traveled with him and were probably hidden out until an auspicious moment. She'd come to warn them.

"You're a girl, Julie." Slim told her proudly and had to clear his throat.

"Yes," Jase agreed. "It was wonderful, Julie. Maybe you and Slim want to talk a minute." He smiled at her and turned to leave when she caught his arm.

"Not now," she said too quickly. "Slim and I have plenty of time."

"Sure," Slim drawled.

HER HAND slipped into Jase's as they started down the stairs, Slim following them. They were half way down when the front door of the Inn opened and Deborah stood in there. She stared up at them. Her face stiffened.

"I came back, Jase, to ask if you wanted to ride out to the ranch with me in the wagon." Her voice trembled, then grew steady. She managed a twisted smile. "I'm sorry I didn't know you were here." She started out the door and stopped. Slowly, she turned back, a strange calculating look in her eyes. "Why not come stay at the ranch, Julie?"

If Julie were surprised she didn't show it. "I'd love to. I can't think of anything I'd love more. I'll get my carpet bag."

Jase walked over and looked down into Deborah's stormy eyes. "Why?" he asked. "Just why?"

"My father seems to like you and the Buena Vista is famous for its hospitality." Her voice was dangerously sweet. "Any friend of yours is surely welcome."

"Oh, hell," he said and strode out into the hot sun. Here she was jealous of Julie because of Amos, yet to dig into Jase she'd asked the girl she hated to stay under the same roof with Amos. It was crazy.

Slim and he waited until Mr. Reynolds came and welcomed Julie warmly. They both stood in the dust until

the wagon drove down the road, then Slim dived into the saloon.

"Can you figure it?" Slim demanded and drank deeply of his beer.

"Figure it!" Jase exploded. "My gawd, can any man figure a girl?"

"Naw." Slim slammed down his mug. "Let's ride. I got to see Amos' face when Julie drives up."

They all arrived in the ranch yard together and Amos' stunned face was worth the hurry. For the first time, he lost his suavity. He started at her, at Deborah and then back again, red pouring into his face.

"I came after you," Julie told him gayly, "because you said you'd investigate Pa's claim those men jumped right after Pa was shot. I have all the papers. They're raising more capital to increase their holdings and this is my only chance, Amos, to get back what's mine."

Amos looked unhappy, but he smiled. "Good. If that's what you came for. This is the time to make your move. Let me have the papers, Julie, and I'll go over them. If you'll excuse me, Deborah?"

"Of course. Let me show you to your room, Julie."

After the two girls left, Amos whirled on Jase. "What the hell do you mean bringing Julie here?"

"I didn't bring her. She came to bring papers to you, remember?" He grinned.

"I wonder." Amos' face looked heavier somehow. "And I ought to kill you for meeting Deborah out on the gallery last night. I heard you both." He moved a step toward Jase and stopped. "You stay away from her. She's mine and she's marrying me next week." He was triumphant when he saw how hard it hit Jase. "She set the date this morning."

Jase could feel the misery build in him. Or he supposed it was that. It was something he'd never felt before and it didn't matter what it was called. It was like the end of the world. From the start he supposed he should have known that he'd found Deborah too late.

"Congratulations," he said curtly.

"You only wanted this ranch." Amos laughed. "But you'll never get it. It's mine, along with Debby. All mine."

Jase hit him. Hard on the side of his jaw and Amos crashed backwards. Jase stepped over him as he walked out of the room.

Cold rage choked him, driving out the misery. Amos didn't give a damn about Deborah. He didn't give a damn about anyone except himself and power and money. A cold greedy unscrupulous man who'd make hell out of a woman's life. He wondered what tricks Amos would play on Julie in connection with her mining claim? He'd never level with anyone.

Jase wheeled and found Mr. Reynolds in his office. He came and stood in front of the desk.

"Don't ask me why, sir, but would you do me a favor before I leave? Will you look over the papers Julie brought to Amos?"

Mr. Reynolds looked back into Jase's eyes steadily for a long time. "Yes," he finally said and pushed back his chair.

"Thanks."

OUTSIDE, he found Slim hunkered down by the bunk house. "I'm riding," Jase said. "I'm hitting out for San Francisco in the morning. I've no money for a ranch now and I don't want to hang around here. If any of Amos' gang are going to ambush me I don't want to keep them waiting." He smiled grimly. "I'm riding alone."

"Like hell." Slim took up some dirt and tossed it in his hand. "So you're quittin'? You're letting that toad walk off with your girl."

He heard Deborah's voice and a kind of crazy hope stirred through him. "She's not married to that son yet, so maybe I have a chance. Maybe I'm not quitting—yet." He grinned as he walked to the house. Love, he decided, made a man nuts.

Inside, he heard Mr. Reynolds voice and Amos' rise loudly behind the closed office door. He saw Deborah in the hall staring at it, a puzzled frown on her face. Jase went to her.

He pulled her around toward him. "I understand you're marrying Amos next week. Is it true?"

"What do you care?" Her voice rose. "Julie followed you here, so isn't she enough for you to manage without bothering me?" She looked away from him.

"Meet me outside when the house quiets down tonight. Unless you're afraid?" His eyes laughed down into hers and he saw the color brush her cheeks. "By the creek?"

Amos was standing in the hall staring at them. Probably he overheard what they'd said, but Jase didn't care. He didn't care about anything if Deborah met him tonight in the moonlight.

Mr. Reynolds came out of his office, his face stern. "Get Julie, please Deborah. Amos has something to tell her." No one spoke until Deborah brought Julie. "Tell her, Amos."

Slim slipped in quietly and all of them waited for a sullen infuriated Amos to speak. "There's a technicality I, or we spotted and I'm confident that you'll be able to reclaim your mining property. I'll," he wet his lips, "I'll guarantee it to you, Julie."

Jase glanced quickly at Mr. Reynolds and the old man nodded his head.

"Well, what do you know," Jase laughed jubilantly. "Justice is to be done." At least he'd been able to do something for Julie, one of the nicest kids he'd ever known. He turned and winked at Slim.

Julie drew in a long breath and her eyes glanced at Jase only for a second, before she ran to Slim. She threw her arms around him and he held her close. "It's, it's for us," she said brokenly and Slim looked like a man who's found the sunrise.

Before supper Jase found a note in his room from Deborah. It told him to meet her later up the creek at the willows and not to mention it. He stared at it for a long time. Maybe he was going to find the sunrise too.

Supper stretched on and the hours until the house quieted were endless. When he tried to meet Deborah's eyes she always glanced away. She seemed unusually quiet.

IT WAS LATE when Jase finally slipped out and made his way up the creek to the willows. Idly, he wondered why Deborah had wanted to meet him so far away from the house?

He was ahead of time. He'd never mind waiting for her if only he'd know she'd always come. A clump of acacia trees cast grotesque shadows in the moonlight. Jase smiled as he paced restlessly.

There was a sudden noise behind him. He jumped. Realizing too late that he'd walked into the very ambush Julie had come so many miles to warn him about. Funny, if he never got to meet Deborah after all. Ever. The note had been a ruse, of course, planted by Amos when he'd heard Jase ask her to meet him.

He recognized Billy, the ruffian he'd dumped into the water the day he'd arrived.

Billy was laughing his sides out when he came toward Jase. A great hulk of a man, more giant than human. He lunged at Jase who slashed savagely at Bill's midriff. Billy only grunted and came on in slugging wildly. Jase stepped inside a swing and crashed his fist against the giant's jaw. Billy only kept laughing. He crashed Jase to the ground with a solid blow to his head.

Slowly, he got to his feet, rolling a little so Billy couldn't kick in his ribs. He shook his head to clear it. He fought then as he never had before, fighting for his life. Jase stood with his feet planted wide for leverage in his blows and slugged at Billy's soft belly. the only soft spot in the man. When, at last, Jase drove uppercuts

into the giant's face, the huge man finally staggered, then dropped down like a log.

There was a noise behind Jase and he turned, his breath coming in painful gasps. Slim was cracking another hoodlum's skull with the butt of his gun.

"Thanks." Jase smiled and went slowly to the creek to wash his face.

"Dad blame it, I'm late. Deborah came running for me." Slim grinned. "Seems you didn't come to the right place to meet her and when she started back to the house, mad as a vixen, she heard funny sounds coming from here and ran for me." Slim looked at him. "Julie's going to marry me, Jase. If I'll keep shaved." He chuckled. "For a while we're going to her pa's old diggings. She kind of likes you a lot and I think it'll help if we get used to each other before you and I go on as partners." He held out his hand and his clasp was warm and firm. "Julie and I'll come back when you get your ranch, or if you ever need us. Hell, I got to pay you for all those pants."

"It can't be too soon, Slim. All the best."

His eyes stung a little. He'd miss Slim and Julie. Wearily, Jase turned to the house. Deborah *had* come and she'd be waiting somewhere.

There was a streak of motion and she was in his arms.

"Oh, darling, I've been so frightened. I've been hateful too. I was jealous as sin over Julie's liking you. I, I wanted you." Deborah buried her face against him for a second and then she laughed up into his eyes. "You've got to run this ranch with father, and Slim can help when they come back." Her arms tightened around him. "You've got to marry me because you gave me the white silk for my wedding dress."

He laughed softly. "I had a hunch it might work out that way."

"Oh, darling," she whispered again.

They kissed in the bright moonlight and there was no longer need for words. It was all there in the kiss because this time the girl from the Buena Vista gave her heart to her man.

★

There were two questions that a good detective should have asked at the very beginning: why had a knife-killer switched to a gun? And why had the victim been switched, just as suddenly. Sherlock Holmes would have deduced it in five minutes or less, no doubt — but I could see that it was going to take me longer. But then, Holmes didn't have a girl like Joy to distract him . . .

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DON'T MONKEY WITH MURDER

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Skeeter Makes A Wager

by Clyde Harper

This gal Mickey Malone had the jump on him, and Skeeter knew he'd be tongue-lashed to a pulp if he couldn't get the edge on her fast.

TEN MINUTES after he met her, Skeeter Bill Bailey decided he could not depend on Mickey Malone for help.

The barnkeeper came to the back lot watering trough where Skeeter Bill, stripped to the waist, was dousing him-

self with cold water. He supposed he looked pretty bad—needed a shave, food, a few hours sleep. The game had lasted all night, just broken up about twenty minutes ago.

"Someone up front to see you," the barnkeeper told Skeeter.

"Tell him to come back here." Skeeter wondered if it was Tim, but decided not; Tim had written that he would be at the ranch.

"You'd better put on your shirt," said the barnkeeper. "It ain't a he; it's a she. And mad enough, I'd judge, to boil that water if you want to shave."

"Oh!" Skeeter blinked, wiped water from his chest and face. He'd been named William Henry Bailey, but folks mostly called him Skeeter or Skeeter Bill. He was lank and lean, did perhaps resemble an elongated mosquito. But there was rugged strength in his slender frame, like the toughness of a desert ocotillo.

The barnkeeper stalked away. Skeeter Bill clamped on his hat, took up his shirt he'd draped over the watering trough pump. He shook it vigorously, to rid it if he could, of saloon odors and stale smoke encountered during the all-night game.

"He says come on back there," Skeeter heard the barnkeeper say. He did not hear a reply, and hurried to tuck in the tail of his shirt.

Hardly was he finished when she strode from the hallway. She was clad in working range garb of levis, checked shirt, worn Stetson. She was mad, all right; stormy eyes were in strict keeping with short, reddish hair partly corraled beneath the flat-crowned hat.

"You certainly look fine! Lot of help you'll be to Uncle Tim." Her scornful voice rocked Skeeter more than had the cold pump water.

"If you're as tough as you talk," declared Skeeter, flushing, "I don't see why Tim sent for me. You ought to be able to handle anything."

"He thinks you're the answer. *I* think..." She made a gesture which was more deprecating than any word she could have chosen. "When you didn't reach the ranch yesterday, Uncle Tim reckoned you'd stopped to play poker. I reckoned it was to get a belly full of liquor. From your looks I'd say you've succeeded in both. You look like a bum, and probably lost everything but your shirt. If you're all we have to depend on, heaven help the Malones."

Back up the hallway was an explosion of pent-up laughter. This was almost too much. Skeeter Bill was tempted to seek out the barnkeeper and give him a punch in the nose. Then Skeeter's sense of humor was aroused; he'd laugh, too, if the situation was reversed.

Skeeter recalled the old saying, "Fight fire with fire." The muscles in his jaw smoothed out, and sarcasm crept into his voice. "Just like a woman. Talk, talk, talk, until a man's ears fall off!"

His audacity startled her, left her staring, mouth agape.

GRINNING, Skeeter Bill strode past. He wouldn't tell her about the all-night game. He winked at the barn-man to keep silent, walked toward her buckboard out front. She'd done some shopping, apparently: a box of groceries, tobacco for the men, two blocks of cattle salt.

"Come on, let's go; you're keeping me waiting." Skeeter Bill swung into the buckboard.

She dashed out behind him, leaped into the driver's seat. Her eyes were dark with anger *"I'm* keeping *you* waiting? Now you listen to me, Bill Bailey..."

"Talk, talk. Better let me drive, or we'll never get to the ranch." He reached for the reins, arrogantly.

Angrily, she held them away and brought them down sharply on the horses. The spirited team lunged and sped out of town. Skeeter took elaborate pains to brace himself as they skidded around a curve in a swirl of dust.

She wholly ignored his action, but made no effort to check the team; they bounded along the road that paralleled the newly-built railroad track. Skeeter Bill noted the huge stockpiles of track-building material. There were all sorts of tools and equipment.

His inspection was disrupted as the team cut sharply to the right, following the road across the tracks. The earthen dump had settled and the protruding track proved too much for the speedily drawn rig. It bounced wildly as wheel rims and steel rails clashed for mastery. The rails won; with a rending of broken spokes, the left rear wheel collapsed. The dragging hub brought the team to a jolting halt.

"Damn!" said Miss Mickey Malone in a voice that invited no comment.

She started the team and pulled the broken rig out of the road. "Take the horse on your side. They ride as well as drive; I broke them myself."

Leaping to the ground, she unhitched and stripped harness from her horse. Skeeter Bill followed suit, and they swung astride. The horses moved in a fast, running-walk that would soon cover the distance to the ranch.

Covertly, Skeeter Bill studied his slender companion. Five years ago, when he ramrodded the M-Bar trail herd north, she was mostly skinny arms and legs, buck-teeth and freckles. But time does wonderful things. Skeeter Bill found himself admiring her pert, little figure, the saucy tilt of her nose.

Once or twice he tried to think of something that would start conversation. But the avoidance of her gaze suggested it was wisest to keep silent.

SKEETER supposed he should not have stopped in town yesterday. He had meant to feed his horse, get a beer and bite to eat, and go on out to the ranch. He did leave his horse at the livery barn, but got no further than the beer himself.

A red-hot poker game was in session in the saloon. It was payday for the track-laying crew of the railroad being built through the valley. If Skeeter Bill Bailey had a weakness, it was to see what card the next deal would give him.

By midnight, he was well ahead of the game; by sun-up he was over four-hundred winner. Players changed as some went broke and others took their places. But three who kept in the game all night were the head butcher of the railroad crew, and Monk Ballew, owner of the saloon.

It was the butcher who brought the game to an end. "I've got to get back to camp. Have to clean up today, get ready to butcher tomorrow."

"Butcher?" It was Ballew. "You think Malone will try again, after what happened last week?"

"If he don't, we'll be in a hell of a shape for beef." The butcher cashed in his chips, ordered them all a drink.

"I don't know what's happened," said Skeeter Bill. "But I know Tim Malone; he'll have your beef there on time."

Monk Ballew stared at Skeeter in the back-bar mirror. He was one of the biggest men Skeeter had ever met, seemed possessed with self-confidence to match his large body.

This man might be Tim's big trouble, Skeeter thought, *and here I am drinking with him.*

Ballew said, "I figured you'd come to help Malone. You can make twice as much working for me."

"I've worked for Tim before; I like the way he pays off."

Ballew slowly nodded, said nothing more. They finished their drink. Skeeter went to the bar to wash up; that was where Mickey found him.

IT WAS ALMOST noon when they reached the ranchhouse. Short-statured Tim Malone sat in a rocking chair on the front porch, left leg propped before him. His voice, deep and rumbling, fitted his powerfully built body. "Glad to see you, Skeeter. Mickey, what happened to the rig?"

"A wheel broke down at the track

crossing. The boys will have to go fix it." At the door Mickey turned, disapproval in her voice. "Better put Bill to bed. He was up all night gambling; even lost his horse and saddle." The screen slammed behind her.

"She hates gambling like a roadrunner hates a snake," grunted Tim Malone. "Her dad was killed in the crossfire when two gamblers got mad and shot it out."

"Just to keep the record straight, I won four hundred; and my horse and saddle are in the barn in town. She jumped to her own conclusions, and I just let her jump."

The wounded rancher chuckled. "She'll be madder than ever when she finds that out."

Skeeter Bill gazed across the wide valley. Smoke from the workcrew train could be seen in the distance as the train backed into town for more tracklaying materials. Skeeter brought his gaze back to the rancher's bandaged leg.

"Monk Ballew do that?"

"Maybe. Why?"

"He was in the game last night. This morning he offered me twice what you'd pay if I worked for him."

"Did he say what you'd be doing?"

"Didn't give him a chance. Wasn't interested in his offer."

Tim Malone frowned, rubbed a stubby forefinger across his chin. "Probably would be helping break my beef contract with the railroad. Don't know for sure it's him, but somebody is trying to do it. And I've been told he's recently talked about a contract with the railroad buyers. Lots of us did that before the contract was let, but Ballew's the only one who's done it—so far as I know—since I got the contract several weeks ago."

"Can we bring him out in the open?"

"Maybe. That's why I wired you to come. I'll pay you fifty dollars for each delivery you make to the railroad camp. That's dam' good wages, Skeeter, for one day's work a week—but you'll earn it. Besides Ballew, you've got Dry Flats to whip. That's quite a problem itself when you're trying to get fat beef across."

Mickey interrupted to announce dinner was ready. With some assistance from a home-made crutch, Malone led the way inside. The cowhands came from the bunkhouse. Skeeter Bill got acquainted during wash-up on the back porch. Two of the boys carried arms in slings.

The meal was the kind to delight a hungry man. There were thick steaks, fried potatoes and baked potatoes and baked beans, butter and hot biscuits and tangy "skeety" honey. To top all off was a thick chunk of apple pie and plenty of hot, black coffee. Skeeter Bill was amazed that Mickey could set forth such a splendid meal in the short time it had taken.

MALONE and the others talked as they ate. By the time the pie was finished, Skeeter Bill had the facts. The railroad had contracted for ten head of M-Bar beef each week to be delivered to the camp. The price was about ten dollars per head more than market, a bonus for having the animals in top condition.

The construction camp moved as work progressed. Three weeks ago it had located at the entrance to Granite Gap, would be there some time while workers hewed through the rocky pass. The camp was forty miles from the M-Bar, across the sun-parched, arid Dry Flats. Going around the flats was almost a hundred miles, too impractical for fattened beef being taken to the butcher's block.

"The only way is straight across at night," declared Malone as they dawdled over a last cup of coffee. "But somebody had decided to cause us trouble; two weeks ago our herd was spooked by half a dozen armed riders. We weren't expecting them, and they caught us off guard. Last week, they did it again, and they meant business; three of us were wounded, and four steers killed. We

don't know whether we wounded any of them or not, but we were late delivering the other six steers. They told us at camp we'd have to do better this week, or they'd give the contract to somebody else."

Tim brought his thick hand down with a thump that made the dishes rattle. "If we don't get through on time this week, somebody else will get the contract. If it is Ballew, it will still be M-Bar beef that is delivered to the railroad camp. He hasn't got a ranch—just a crew of wide-loopers back in the hills. They'll steal our cattle; wet-blanket the brand; let it set a few days; then drive on down to the butcher. Dam' it, Skeeter, that contract is for twenty-five weeks, ten head a week, ten dollars a head bonus. That's twenty-five hundred bonus above the market-price, and the market's right here at home instead of way off to Dodge City."

"There's only one way to handle a snake," said Skeeter Bill; "shoot off its head."

"Sidewinders don't rattle," said one of the men who carried an arm in a sling. "They strike without warning when you least expect it. I reckon I ought to know."

"Sidewinders ain't dangerous if you know where they are. We'll build us a snake-trap and be watching and waiting." A reckless glint came in Skeeter's eyes and his voice quickened with planning. The others leaned curiously forward.

"Have the ten head of beef ready to start about five. It'll begin to cool by then." Skeeter Bill turned to Malone. "I'll need a good fast horse and about two hundred dollars."

At the mention of money there was a sharp sound from Mickey. The excitement of his planning had caught her as it had the others, but the memory of his gambling all night was vivid and not to be ignored.

He seemed to read her mind. "The two hundred is to buy into a game, all right; but this time M-Bar is the stake. And our ace in the hole may be what the two hundred buys. I'll be back with what I'm going after, and I'll be back on time!"

A flush touched her cheeks, and she moved her glance away. "My roan is the fastest horse on the ranch. Tobe, get it ready."

Skeeter Bill pushed back his chair. "I'll help you, Tobe."

Tim returned to his porch chair and Mickey brought the two hundred to him from the the front room safe.

Skeeter Bill rode around for the money, then lightly touched spurs to the deep-barreled roan. The horse took off in a ground-eating lope.

"Look!" Tim Malone was surprised. "He's heading for the railroad camp. Now what the heck's he planned?" He swung to the boys with growing excitement. "Bill, you and Buck can still ride, even with one arm in a sling. Gather ten head of the best you can find. Tobe, you and Charley go fix that buckboard. Have it here ready to travel by five. If you don't, I'll skin you alive!"

The boys hurried off to carry out instructions. Mickey spun on her heel.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll have supper ready before we start, but the dishes will just have to wait. You'll need me to drive across the flats. I wouldn't miss this trip!"

"I see." Tim Malone stared across the valley toward the receding dot that was Skeeter Bill Bailey. A grin crinkled Tim's rugged face. "So. She busts the buckboard, is madder'n a wet hen when she gets home, then rushes to bake an apple pie. I'd like to know what happened in town. I reckon there's things Skeeter savvies besides horses and cattle!"

SKEETER BILL frowned as he crossed the flats, holding the roan to a running-walk in the oven-like heat. His plan had seemed clear when first he started. But now his mind was cluttered by a galaxy of other thoughts —such as apple pie, broken wheels, and the swell way this roan was trained.

He censured himself with a withering oath, and forced his thoughts back to his plan. If it worked, Ballew would be stopped and M-Bar beef would be delivered each trip. There was a total of ten more trips, at fifty dollars per trip for him. That five hundred added to what he'd won would give him almost a thousand dollars. Not much, to be sure, but many a now-prosperous rancher had started on less.

Skeeter swung his feet up as the roan breasted tall weeds. He saw that his boots needed polishing. Funny, he'd never noticed that before.

Like a sock on the jaw, it struck him. A stiff drink wasn't handy, so Skeeter built a quick smoke. Not until he had inhaled deeply would he scan his thoughts again. He found himself suddenly grinning: "Apple pie for dinner, then the next minute maybe the plate busted over your head. Things would never be dull with her!"

●

At the sprawling railroad camp, the chief butcher was easily found. Skeeter explained the purpose of his visit.

"The boss is out with the laying crew, but I'll stand good for what you want. No need to buy if you bring it back whole."

Skeeter voiced his thanks and hurried for town. The barnkeeper solemnly scratched his chin as he listened, then nodded.

"Let me use Mickey's horse, and watch the barn for me."

In surprisingly short time he returned driving a team of big mules hitched to a flat-bed, wide-tired wagon. The roan was tied to the tailgate.

"A loan from a fellow who used to operate a mule wagon-train. Won't cost you a dime if you return them all whole. Come on, I'll help you load the tank."

He closed the barn door and they drove down the street. Curious stares followed them. The barnkeeper chuckled.

"They're wondering what's happening—even Monk Ballew."

The big saloon owner stood in the doorway of his saloon, absorbing every detail. Then stepped back into the building.

Skeeter Bill suddenly checked the team in front of the saloon. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

Now as curious as the onlookers, the barnkeeper accepted. They both ordered beer, and Skeeter invited Ballew to join them.

"Too early for me, just got up. You going to be back for the game tonight?"

"Not tonight; I'll be driving Tim's cattle to the railroad camp."

"Think you'll get through? Tim's had bad luck lately."

"We'll get through." Skeeter gauged Ballew in the bar mirror. Some men were grasping, never got enough... Skeeter laid a roll of money on the bar.

"Four hundred says we get through."

He had been right in his analysis: Ballew snapped at the bet, and the bait. "Make it more if you like."

"My horse and saddle are in the livery barn. They ought to stand two hundred; that makes it six hundred total."

Ballew nodded, counted out the money; and both men silently shoved their stakes over to the barnkeeper to hold.

Back on the wagon, Skeeter spoke. "He'll be down to question you the minute you get back to the barn. Tell him everything he wants to know."

"Sure glad I don't know much to tell; you've borrowed a wagon and a team, and a steel water-tank."

"I'll tell you the rest as we load the tank."

"Hell, if you do that, he'll know how to try to block you."

"Maybe; but you tell him what he wants to know."

The barnman nodded in puzzled agreement. They came to the railroad stockpiles. Skeeter Bill halted beside

a large steel tank, a spare for the roadbed scraper teams.

It was a tough loading-job for just two men, but they made it by much lifting and pushing. They mopped off sweat as they rested, and Skeeter talked. Then the barnkeeper left for the short walk back to his barn. Skeeter Bill started the mules.

A few miles away, he glanced back. A horseman from town was riding northwest, the supposed locality of Monk Ballew's gun-crew. Skeeter Bill grinned and nodded. The sidewinder was beginning to crawl.

THE M-BAR crew stared at the strange assortment a Skeeter drew to a stop. He forestalled questions: "I'll explain later. We'll need lanterns and a big can of oil. Can you boys get them? Tim, here's your money. I meant to buy these things, but they loaned them to us instead; won't cost a cent unless there's some damage."

"Your supper is waiting," said Mickey. "The rest have already eaten. I thought it best for us all to eat before we left."

"We?"

"You dern tootin'!" declared Tim Malone. "Me and Mickey's going in the buckboard. The boys fixed it up and the team's all ready hitched. I wouldn't miss this trip for all the cows in Texas!"

Skeeter Bill rubbed his chin reflectively. "I hadn't planned on that, but I guess it's all right."

Mickey had kept his food warm, and the coffee was hot and good. Once their glances locked as Mickey brought more hot biscuits. For a moment they were still. Then her breathing quickened, and the color heightened in her cheeks. She put down the plate of bread, and tore her eyes away. Skeeter Bill suddenly wished he'd taken time out to shave.

●

Darkness caught them past the edge of Dry Flats. Skeeter Bill lighted one of the lanterns.

"Put that out!" exploded Tim Malone. He fondled a double-barreled shotgun. "I figured we was safe maybe with no moon tonight, and here you light that thing. Ballew's crew will spot us easy."

"I want 'em to," was Skeeter's puzzling reply.

At midnight, Skeeter figured they were about half way across the flats. They were still unmolested. The plan was working, so far...

He halted the wagon, motioning the others to stop. Calmly he lit the other lantern, gave it to one of the boys. The two bobbing blots of light would be visible some distance and watchers would know they had stopped.

"Hurry and water the cattle, 'cause this is the beginning of our snake-trap and it's got to work in a hurry." Skeeter helped lift off the steel water-tank, which had been partly filled at the ranch for benefit of anyone checking up from the hills.

"They think we're stopping an hour for water and rest," Skeeter told them. "But we're stopping just long enough to water the cattle, then push on. The wagon and lanterns will remain here, just like we was resting for a full hour."

The boys drove the cattle up, two at a time, watered them, then drove them back into the shadows.

"Now," said Skeeter, "get the cattle moving. Gotta be quiet, for Ballew and his crew might be edging in. Tim, you and Mickey lead point straight south for a mile or two, then cut west for the railroad camp. Bill, you and Buck ride drag, and keep them on the move. Tobe, you and Charley help me pile some bushes around the wagon to look like cattle resting. Then you take out after the others."

"But what about you?" It was Mickey, frank concern in her voice.

"Sidewinders don't strike until they see their mark. I'll stay here to show them around and try to keep them from following you. Now get the cattle

moving; every second you wait may be too long!"

THE HERD was put into motion, followed the buckboard into the darkness like fat, lumbering shadows. The three men left behind moved briskly about. Tobe hummed a raspy tune, and Charley whistled a bit to cover any slight sound made by the departing herd.

Skeeter Bill unhitched the mules and removed harness and bridles. They'd be free when trouble started, but wouldn't go far from the half-tank of water. They could easily be picked up tomorrow.

The bushes were placed about the wagon. In the shadowy, lantern-flicked darkness, they had the appearance of resting cattle.

"That ought to do it," commended Skeeter. "Now you fellows take off after the others."

"We'll stick with you," said Tobe; "there's several in that sidewinder crew."

"You're both going with Tim and the others. They're liable to need you if Ballew gets wise and don't show up here."

Reluctantly, they slipped into the night after the others.

Skeeter Bill moved about with a lantern, so watchers would think both riders and cattle were resting—easy pickings for armed men coming from the dark.

Skeeter Bill picked up the five-gallon can of coaloil they'd brought. Scattered about were dead bushes and weeds, baked dry by the hot summer sun. He gathered these into a heaping pile and upon them emptied the contents of the can.

THE GENTLE night breeze brought the whispering noises of the flats; the squeak of a mouse, the desert mocker's song, the rustle in brush of a feeding jackrabbit. From afar came the yap of a prowling coyote, and overhead a feathery whirr as a hunting owl glided past.

The hour was almost gone when Skeeter Bill caught the faint sound from the north—the shuffle of hooves in sand, the creak of saddle leather. Skeeter Bill took matches from his pocket and loosened his gun in its holster.

The sounds gave way to motion as dim figures took form; a half dozen riders spread slightly apart. They came abreast with Skeeter.

"They're resting all right!" whispered a rider. "This is easier than we thought."

A hard, cold voice gave an order. "Let them have it!"

Sixguns roared and hot lead ripped into the decoys about the wagon.

Skeeter Bill Bailey grinned, struck his matches, and touched them to the oil-soaked brush. The snake had crawled out of its hole!

He darted behind the riders as greedy flames leaped high and pushed darkness apart. The riders yelled in alarm, realizing they were easy targets for anyone hidden in the dark.

"You're covered!" shouted Skeeter Bill. "Drop your guns or be dropped yourselves!"

They looked to their leader, whose big body set him apart from the rest. Monk Ballew was searching the darkness beyond the brightly-burning brushpile. He knew Bailey had outwitted him, and Monk Ballew didn't like to be outwitted.

"Spur for the dark!" Ballew was hoarse with fury. "There's only one horse; Bailey's alone. Spread out and pick him off."

"Like hell he's alone!" Tim Malone's shotgun tore the night apart. Angry pellets whistled close above the riders' heads. "This next shot will be lower, so drop them guns or I'll cut you in two!"

Trapped in the circle of burning light, five gave up. Five guns hit the ground, and five pairs of hands were raised.

But Monk Ballew's cunning was still with him. He'd caught a stir in the dark. Screened by his surrendering men, Ballew spurred his horse at Skeeter Bill Bailey; his sixgun roared. Ballew laughed as he fired. He couldn't miss at that short distance, and escape was within his grasp.

But from the ground a lance of flame leaped at him. Ballew was hurled upright in the saddle as a crushing blow ripped his chest. His horse shied away from the gun-flash, and Monk Ballew fell to the ground and lay still.

TIM MALONE was driving, bad leg or not. It didn't seem to bother him, for he was humming as he headed the team back east to the M-Bar. Mickey had made him turn around after Tobe and Charley caught up with them. She didn't want to leave Skeeter Bill alone. When the shooting started, Tobe and Charley left Buck and Bill to take the herd on to the railroad camp, and raced back to help. They were too late take part in the rukus, but in plenty of time to take Ballew's crew to the Sheriff and send the undertaker for Ballew.

Ahead, it was getting light; dawn would be upon them before they reached the ranchhouse. It was the beginning of a new day.

Tim glanced back again to see how they fared. Mickey had bound Skeeter Bill's shoulder, made him lie down. For a pillow she used her lap. They sounded plumb crazy to Tim, babbling about apple pie and how to quit poker, biscuits and broncs and raising cattle. Skeeter said something about how much it would take to start.

"Three dollars is enough," Tim heard Mickey say, coyly. "That's all the license costs. Uncle Tim will want to pay the preacher."

★

Four Thrilling New Novelets

NEVER LET HIM KNOW ..... Ellen Batton
Her name was Linda, but everyone who knew her rhymed it with "Iceberg".

JUST WAIT AND SEE ..... Flavia Atwood
Ellen's career meant everything to her — and she didn't like it!

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TODAY'S LOVE STORIES

Now on sale everywhere

Rock couldn't refuse a bet, but sometimes he couldn't understand one!

The Cowboy and The Conquest

by Phyllis Speshock

ROCK WINTERS ordered another whiskey and stared straight ahead of him into the mirror that hung above the bar in the *Glass Slipper* saloon. That way he could see the girls when they came out to dance without really seeming to. His back would be toward the stage, but he could see them in the mirror. That, he figured, was the best way to get her interested in him. It always worked before, leastways, and she couldn't be much different than the rest. They were all females.

He turned the glass around in his fingers and thought about it, the way he come to have the reputation he had. He sure never meant to be no lady-killer. He was a hell of a way from being a dandy! Maybe that was it.

Maybe being six feet two had something to do with it. Or maybe it was his face and the way the fellows roasted him about his hair curling so damned ornery like it did. Or maybe it was just because he was twenty-six and there hadn't no female been able to rope and tie him yet. Maybe it was the money he made being foreman of the biggest spread in the whole basin, the Lazy Y. It might have been any of those things—or all of them.

It might have started when that new schoolmarm took to shying around him, rolling her eyes like she did. Or maybe it was when he went into MacKenzie's Grocery and that oldest daughter of his got to prancing around like an anxious filly while she put up the order for the Lazy Y.

Right away the fellows began to roast him about women.

He went into the *Slipper* and tried to hide himself at the bar, but then the dancing girls started in on him. Sort of hanging around, standing so close to him he'd feel his neck turn hot.

He wouldn't give them the satisfaction of hightailing out of the place in a cloud of dust because if he did, his name'd be mud for as long as he stayed in the basin. He'd fought too many men and worked too hard to give all of that up.

So there wasn't anything else to do but turn around and act like he was enjoying himself. Sometimes he bought

one of them a drink. A couple of times he'd even danced with them—not that he didn't feel like an ass, stumbling around to music, kicking up a dust.

But that was as far as it ever went. Of course, he let them *think* it went farther—if that's what they wanted to think. And after a while, without ever meaning to, he got himself a kind of reputation. He was one of the

toughest hombres in the basin. A man thought twice before tangling with him. He was tough because he'd had to be, left alone like he was when his old man got killed in a gun battle. And now he had a reputation with women, to boot.

Truth was, his own Ma had died when he was born, and he'd kicked around the country with his old man. Then the old man got killed, and he'd learned to kick for himself. That was how he picked up the name Rock—he'd weathered just about everything, and no mere man tried to move him.

After a while, as the girls came and left the *Glass Slipper* but his reputation with them stayed the same, he got to thinking maybe he knew more about them than he realized. Maybe they liked a man to act like he didn't know they was around. Then when he did give one of them a tumble, she'd giggle and act silly-like and forget there was any other man in the place.

Without ever really meaning to, Rock Winters got to be the number one bachelor in the basin. He had every intention of keeping it that way.

THEN THIS new filly came to town. He'd never seen her. The fellows said her name was Nancy Laramie. Already three of them got all banged up in a brawl over who'd see her down the street to the door of her boarding house. Rock knew perfectly well no female was worth all that trouble. A horse, maybe. A piece of land, sure. But a woman? Huh!

Just the same they said they'd like to see him get this one sidling up to him like the others did. They said this one was different. He knew better, by now. He knew about *women.* They were all the same.

But just to uphold his reputation, he was out to make the conquest. He wasn't really interested in her. It was just a matter of principle. He had to show the fellows that if he got as far as he'd got with nothing but guts to go on, he could certainly conquer any woman that showed up!

So they were all here, all of them lined up next to him, watching, making bets among themselves, hoping he'd fall flat on his face so just once they could have something to throw up in his face for the rest of his life. It was a matter of cold calculation, this conquest. It was another victory to be added to a string of victories.

He didn't want any part of her, but he did want to continue living in the basin, just the way he had been for the past five years. All he had to do was to show he could have his way with her, and they'd all calm down and leave him alone again. It was a cinch. She was a female.

All of a sudden the piano started up and the girls came out on the stage and started to do a dance where they turned around tossed their skirts up over their backs. He supposed as how it was meant to thrill the men into spending more money. It didn't fool him none.

The men cheered and tossed coins on the stage and Rock continued to stare straight ahead of him into the mirror.

Then the whole place went loco. Some damned fool turned out half the lights. It was a good way to get a man's pockets picked! He opened his mouth to tell them what he thought

about such a ruckus, but then Tom Crandal liked to stick his elbow through Rock's ribs.

"There she is!" he whispered, like they was at a funeral or something and nobody was supposed to get mouthy. "There she is, Rock—"

Rock squinted hard and looked close at Tom. He sounded like he had a sore throat or something, his voice was kind of raw around the edges.

But Tom stared straight ahead toward the stage. So did all the rest of them. Rock could turn his head and look down the whole row. Half of them had their mouths open. They looked like the suckers he'd caught in the river last year. It made him grin just thinking what silly asses they were.

He turned back to his drink and glanced up in the mirror.

The only light seemed to be shining in some kind of circle on the stage. He saw the curtain draw back and then this girl came out. Usually the fellows stamped their feet and yelled to beat hell. This time, nobody did anything. You could have heard cricket chirp.

She stood there for a minute and he got a pretty good look at her. It was a funny thing. Her dress came clear to the floor. Not an inch of her leg showed. Yet there was something about the way it fit her that made a man think he was seeing more than he ought to. Kind of personal, it was.

She opened her mouth and started to sing. It wasn't at all like anything he'd ever heard in a saloon before. It sounded kind of churchy. He waited for her to cut loose and start swinging the skirt and rolling her eyes. She didn't.

He waited for her to walk down into the crowd and let some fellow reach out and pull her across his lap and try to kiss her.

But she came down, still singing that funny kind of song that liked to put a man to sleep, and not one hombre in the place laid a hand on her. She kept making her way along the tables, close to the bar. He squinted hard to see her face. He wished to hell the mirror hadn't got into the middle of so many scrapes and had a crack down the middle of it. He wished to hell old Ben Adams, the bartender, took a little time off drizzling beer all over the place and washed the damned thing! Maybe a man could see something!

THEN SUDDENLY she stopped right in back of him. He was standing in the way of his own view! That was the only reason he turned around. It wasn't because he was taken by her sweet singing. It was just that he paid for his whiskey and he had a right to see what went with it. He half expected her to reach out and turn him around to face her, the way the others did when he didn't pay any attention. But she never touched him.

He glanced at the other fellows but they were all too busy watching her to see him. So he turned around by himself, kind of slow and easy so as not to call attention to himself.

When he did, *her back was toward him!* She was using him as a kind of background for her song!

He stared at the back of her head and he was kind of surprised. Her hair was red-gold like a sunset, and it didn't have any junk on it to make it that way. He could tell because it looked soft instead of brittle.

Her shoulders were bare above the dress, and it made him feel funny, having every man in the place able to see her bare skin that way. Somehow, the other girls never looked so—*bare*.

He swallowed and took a deep breath and he could smell the sweetness about her. It was different. Not strong enough to knock a man down. Just kind of clean. Like perfumed soap, maybe.

It was a new kind of act, he was sure of that. It was a new way to get men trailing after her. Well, at least he had to give her credit for being smarter than the rest. She acted like

she wasn't interested in any of them—*not even him.* She looked at some place above their heads when she sang.

Then the song was over and one by one the lights went back on. She bowed a little and smiled. He knew that now she'd turn around and ogle up at him. They always did. This pretending like she didn't really see him standing there when she sidled along the bar, that was all an act. She knew damned well he was there. They always knew.

He knew he should have turned his back to her now that it was all over. He could sense the pairs of eyes on him—and her. But he still wanted to see her face up close.

She half turned in the direction of the bar and he got a look at her. She didn't have the paint most of them had. She didn't need it. Her eyes were the first real gray ones he'd ever seen. Her skin was smooth and white like a satin shirt he'd seen at a rodeo one time. Her mouth was—well, it was different somehow. It made him want to swallow like he used to when he lit into a man even though he was scared of the outcome. It was pink, instead of red. It was kind of smooth and curvy, all by itself. He wondered if she was a minister's daughter, the way she looked. But, of course, it was all just a come-on.

He finally got up brains enough to turn his back to her again and look into the mirror. His hand tightened around the whiskey glass and he waited. Now it was time for her to slide close to him. It was the first time in his life he'd ever really wanted a girl to. It made him feel shaky at the pit of his stomach just thinking about it. Of course, he'd never be fool enough to let her know how he felt—or let anybody else know, either.

Now it was time for her hands to close around his arm. It was time for her to say, in that throaty way they had, "Well, big boy, how about buying a little girl a drink?"

But she didn't slide close to him. She didn't touch him at all. He never heard her voice—except while she was singing that song that made him feel like he ought to put money in the collection basket.

What in hell kind of an act was it, anyway?

He turned around suddenly—*just in time to see her disappear behind the curtains of the stage!*

HE DIDN'T know how long it was before he realized his mouth was open like a bear trap. Then he snapped it shut and glanced down the long row of companions. He heard them snicker a little. They knew he'd expected her to make a play for him, right off.

What in hell was wrong with the girl?

She must know who *he* was by this time! The other girls must have told her! She must have seen him in spite of that act she put on. Hell, he was the tallest man in the whole place! He had the best job. He had broader shoulders and a flatter belly. The other girls nicknamed him "handsome." Even the schoolmarm and the storekeeper's daughter were out to get him, to say nothing of these dancehall girls!

Suddenly he felt all hands and feet. He felt his face turn hot. He knew there was a kind of lull in the place. They were all waiting for him to do something about her, this Nancy Laramie. Either that or take a good roasting for the rest of his life. It was a crazy kind of reputation, but he felt he had to uphold it. A man had to be able to live in his own hide.

Truth was, he'd never really chased a woman in his life. Other than kidding around and buying them a drink, there wasn't a hell of a lot he knew about them. Of course, this one was little more than a kid. Eighteen, maybe. Yet, she was a female, and the time had come when Rock Winters had to size-up to the reputation that had come his way, or crawl off like a wounded hound.

He wasn't one to crawl off. Certainly not over a hundred-pound slip of a girl that ought to have her breeches

spanked for being in a dive like this to begin with.

He bolted down his drink so fast it made his throat burn. Then he hitched up his levis and stalked through the little side door that led back stage. He saw the kind of lean-to dressing room with a star tacked onto it and walked over to it and waited. He could hear her moving about inside. He felt like running hell-bent out of the place. He'd never really been alone with a woman before in his life.

He turned back, but he could see them all lined up at the bar, watching him through the crack between the curtains. There was nothing else he could do.

He pushed open the flimsy door, stepped quickly inside and closed it behind him, leaning against it for support. His breath felt like it was going to choke him to death. His eyes squinted and found hers in the little mirror she sat in front of. It seemed as if she was everywhere. Her back toward him. Her face toward him in the mirror.

She didn't flinch, but she said softly, in a way that meant fight or die if it came from a man, *"Get out, cowboy!"*

That was the first time he knew that her looks and her spirit didn't go together. She wasn't afraid of the devil himself.

"Not yet—" he managed to get out and his voice made him turn even redder. It sounded like it came from a shaking schoolboy and not a man six feet two. "My name's Rock Winters—"

He'd never been much with words, to begin with. He always left all the fancy talk to those that needed it. He had two good fists. He never figured as how he'd be shut in[t] such close quarters with a female.

She turned then and stared at him. It was like she was laughing inside even though her face was as expressionless as a statue.

"I know what your name is, cowboy. I've been—warned about you—"

She looked down at her hands and he began to relax. Maybe she was plumb scared of him, poor little kid!

"I suppose the other girls—" he began, both pleased and a little embarrassed about his reputation.

She looked wide-eyed as a newborn calf. "Oh, no. The other *fellows*. Tom Crandal and Red Saunders and—and—" The way she looked up at him made him feel like he'd been hit in the middle.

His own pack warning her about him and then acting like he was supposed to make her chase after him! He was beat on every side!

He opened his mouth to tell her what a lowdown bunch they were, even though *he* liked the coyotes himself, but there was a tap on her door and he heard Red Saunders snicker.

"Hey, Rock, you all right in there? She ain't got you roped and tied or anything?"

IT MADE his face turn red. He felt like knocking somebody down. He looked quick at the girl and she seemed to be trying to get rid of a smile around her mouth. He knew what he had to do. He knew that eventually Saunders would get around to opening the door. There wasn't much of a way out. He wasn't going to slink out past Saunders like a wounded prairie dog. He wasn't going to sneak past the girl and make it out the window into the street. He had to face up to it.

His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides and he felt about as lowdown as a rustler, taking advantage of such a kid. But it was either her or him, and a kiss wouldn't kill her. If

he didn't kiss her, *he'd* be dead for sure—or might as well be as to try to go on living in the basin.

"I'm sorry, ma'am—" he said softly and took a few steps toward her.

Almost before he could draw his breath, she whipped a gun off the top of the dressing table and pointed it directly at his belly.

"Don't try it, cowboy," she warned him in a deadly whisper. "I came out here to try to get away from the name my brother made for us. Laramie's just something I picked up along the way. I was taught to handle a gun by one of the best boys in the business. My brother was Danny Darrow."

Rock felt his scalp prickle. *Her? The sister of an outlaw?* The sister of a man who died just last month shooting his way out of a bank robbery in Yellow Gap? *He couldn't believe it!*

"Like I said—I'm sorry, ma'am. I got no intention o' hurtin' you—"

Red Saunders tapped again. He could hear some of the others out there with him. He knew she could hear them, too. He walked right up close to her, until he felt the shove of the gun in his middle.

"All I'm gonna' do—" he tried to tell her, not really thinking she'd use the damned thing no matter what she'd said.

"One squeeze of the trigger, Rock Winters, and you've breathed your last breath! Take your hands off me—!"

But he heard the latch on the door rattle and knew they'd be poking their noses into the little room. He didn't want to die, by a hell of a long shot, but he guessed he might as well as to face being showed up as a coward by a slip of a girl, outlaw's sister or no outlaw's sister. It wasn't so much that a man had to die. It was *how* he died. Whether he did it like a man, or whether he did it like a yellow belly. He guessed as how kissing a woman made him as much of a man as anything else.

He heard the door swing all the way open. In one swift movement he slid

his left hand to the right of the gun and pushed it neatly to one side. He heard it go off somewhere beyond him. He knew instinctively it couldn't have hurt anybody.

Then his right arm circled her waist and he pulled her tight against him and bent her a little way backward and clamped his mouth down on hers. He heard the gun when it hit the floor. He felt her arms hang on to his and then slide up to his shoulders.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he heard Tom Crandal say.

Then the door closed again, and Rock knew they were alone. The game was all over. He could let her go now. He'd proved the point, all right. Only trouble was—he *wanted* her there!

IT WAS THE first time in his life he'd ever held a girl close like that, ever kissed a girl directly on the mouth until he felt weak inside and his knees wobbled. It was the first time a girl'd ever threatened to kill him and then go soft for him when he went ahead with it, anyway.

When he finally took his mouth off hers, she just stood there, close like that. For some crazy damned reason that made him feel like a fool, he reached up and touched that red-gold hair and it was soft. It was several seconds before he realized she was crying.

That was when he let her go. Poor kid! He'd probably scared the hell out of her!

She laughed and reached in back of

her for a handkerchief, but it really wasn't much of a laugh. It was more of a coverup.

"You—you remind me somehow of —my brother—before he—" She stopped talking and looked up at him with those wide eyes and he felt his blood hammering through him like a wind storm.

"I mean—when he was younger," she went on finally. "Before Mom and Pop died. Things were better then. But after he got to—breaking the law, it all went bad. I wouldn't take money from him—not the way he earned it, so I struck out on my own. I've been a dance hall girl ever since. A year and a half now."

Rock took a step nearer her, but she backed away. He wished to hell she wouldn't tell him all this stuff. It made him feel like he was responsible for her or something.

"Nancy—" He didn't really know what he wanted to say, anyway. All he knew was that he wanted her to stop crying and the best way he knew how was to put his arms around her and tell her it was all right.

But she held up a protesting hand and began to cry harder than ever.

"No! Rock, you don't understand! *It was all a bet!*"

He heard it but it didn't make sense. A bet? *What* was a bet? He stayed in his tracks and let her go on with it.

"You see—being a dance hall girl isn't much different from anything else. I got kidded a lot about my brother. Men got to thinking—well, maybe I was like him—lawless, too. That's why I changed my name. And I got to be a pretty good singer. I found out you didn't have to show your legs to draw a crowd. You know what I mean?"

Rock swallowed hard. He knew all right.

"Well, then other girls got jealous. You know how women are. When I came here—well, they all ganged up and bet me that—" She stopped and caught her lower lip between two rows of the evenest teeth he'd ever seen. "They bet me *I couldn't hook you!*" She wasn't looking at him when she finished talking, and no wonder!

For a minute Rock just stood there with his mouth open. Then it struck him hard. It was all just a female game to make an ass out of him! She never meant to shoot him! It was just another way to make him come after her —dare him into it! And here he'd been damned fool enough to worry about her! To want to help her—maybe even take care of her hmiself!

He whirled away from her with his face hot as a poker.

"Rock—" she pleaded gently. "Rock, I really didn't want to do it, but I have to live with these girls—"

More female talk! He stalked out of the place fast. The fellows didn't snicker when he walked past the bar. They just stared after him. He'd showed them a thing or two!

AND IN THE next few weeks, they left him alone and tended to their own business for once. He proved he was still the man they'd talked him into being! He never wanted any part of women to begin with. He never knew how he got into such a mess.

He stayed away from the *Glass Slipper* like the place had the plague. *Women!* Turn a man's knees weak and then confess to being an outlaw's sister and making a bet she could hook *him!*

"How come you make old Mackey go into town for the supplies?" Crandal finally asked him one day. "You afraid or something?"

Rock felt like hitting him in the teeth.

"What would I be afraid of?"

"Oh, I dunno'—goin' into the *Slipper,* maybe."

The way he said it made Rock feel sick to his stomach. Why didn't they mind their own damned business?

Rock snorted and walked off.

"I got ten says you don't dare face that little filly! What she do to you? Slap you down for kissin' her?"

Rock stopped in his tracks. He

never turned down a bet in his life. He didn't dare to—not and live with these guys.

Suddenly something prickled in his mind and he remembered the girl looking up at him and saying, "I didn't eally want to, but I have to live with these girls—" Why, he'd never stopped to figure that a girl alone like that might have the same troubles he did! He'd hated her for doing such a rotten trick, but maybe she'd *had* to! Hell, she had to eat, too! She'd been chased all over the West trying to live down something she had no part of as it was, being an outlaw's sister.

Suddenly it made him boil, thinking of some yellow dog chasing after her, jeering at her for something the kid couldn't help! Maybe he'd been just as bad as the rest for not understanding. Lord knew she needed a friend. Being pretty didn't mean she was any happier. It might even make her more miserable—since she was decent the way she was. It made her learn to shoot and to hold her own—with any man *or* woman. Being pretty got her food, but it made her fight for it, too.

Rock turned back to Crandal with his fists doubled.

"You got yourself a bet! Any of the others want to add to it?"

By the time night came, he was ready for anything. He might even make a damned fool of himself and apologize to her. It wasn't that he cared so much any more what the fellows thought of him. It was just that he learned what *she* thought counted for something, too.

He barged into the *Glass Slipper* with the rest of them and leaned against the bar. It was the same as before only this time he stared directly at the stage and let come what may.

It started the same. The other girls. Then her. In a dress that came clean to the floor but still made him want to spank her breeches for wearing it, it was that tight.

She sang like an angel, making her way through the crowd. Then something happened.

She looked up and saw him standing there and she missed a word or two of the song. Right away he saw the ornery look come into her eyes. It was like she knew he expected the worst so she was out to give it to him.

She stopped singing altogether. In one quick move of her arm she emptied a table and roused the men seated 'round it. Then she said something to the squatty little piano player. Right off, he started in on a tune that wasn't her type. Even Rock knew that. She stepped up on the table and began to sing too loud and swing her skirts like a hussy.

The men hooted and hollered—all except the men from the Lazy Y. They just stood there—and stared at *him*. And Rock was mad clear down to the high heels of his boots. He knew he should have tanned her hide long ago. Well, *this was it*!

HE STEPPED forward and stuck his hands into the flurry of kicking heels and ruffled skirts and hauled her down off the table and piled her screaming, wriggling little body neatly over one big shoulder. Without a word to anybody he carried her back to her dingy dressing room and put her down. She tore into him like a wildcat, scratching, biting, saying words ladies shouldn't even know about.

There wasn't much else he could do. He just clamped both her arms at her sides and he kissed her. It made him get that quivery feeling in the pit of his stomach again, the way she felt tight against him. It made him want to take her out of this dive and put her in a neat little ranch house and keep her busy with a flock of kids to tend.

He didn't her let go until she stopped fighting him. Then she started that soft crying again, her face against his shoulder.

"Oh, Rock—Rock—" she whispered.

It was a long time before he could

get his voice to stop hiding in his throat. And when it finally did come out, it said the damnedest things!

"I've saved up a little money. I thought maybe someday I'd be startin' a spread of my own, Nancy. A man ought to have a place of his own—a life of his own is what I mean, I guess—"

He never got much further. One of the dance hall girls stepped through the door and grinned at Nancy.

"Looks like you won your bet, honey," she said in a throaty voice. "Here's the money—" She handed Nancy a little roll of bills. Nancy took it and looked up at Rock to see if she was going to get walloped for it. Rock just grinned at her.

Crandal was next. "You won the bet, Rock," he said sheepishly, turning his battered hat over and over in his fingers. "And the rest of the money here is sort of a collection we took up. We never meant to cause no trouble, Rock. It was just that sometimes a fellar and a gal seem to go together like ham and eggs. It just seemed like you and Nancy was meant to be. You know what I mean? Anyway, we thought this'd help. It's kind of a weddin' present—shucks, *you* know."

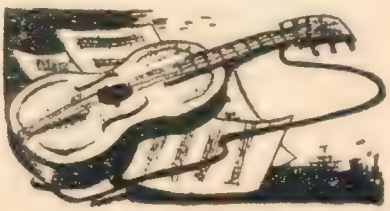
Rock stuck his fist in Crandal's middle. "You oldsonofagun!" he said to keep from bawling like a calf.

Then somehow everybody had a silly grin on his face and Rock slipped his arm around Nancy's middle like he owned her already and they went outside to make a night of it. Only this time, Nancy would be the guest of honor and not a working girl. Rock figured as how there *had* been a conquest made, one way or another. But he was hanged if he knew who'd made it!

★

The West As It Was

(*continued from page 8*)



She was no longer the kind girl known as Peaceful Dove; she had changed completely, and the desire for revenge had accomplished that change. When she first came in sight of the Skidi village, not a soul knew who it was that was coming. She rode like a warrior, for she had the scalp on a pole. Her face was painted black, and she was singing her husband's war-song. The people wondered who it could be. But at last, when she got close to them, they knew who it was. Her relations had mourned her for dead, but now she had returned with good news—she brought not only a scalp and they had not yet done so.

There was rejoicing in the village, for she had wiped away the tears from parents, brothers, and sisters of the dead.

But now the young warriors were afraid to meet her—she had taken a scalp and they had not yet done so. There was shame in their hearts. They who had talked much about war had not as yet made their first coup. She, who had been a creature of peace, had been a successful warrior.

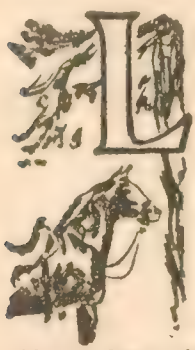
After that time she was always asked to come into the councils of the braves. She was always welcome at the old men's feasts over the sacred bundle. The words and wisdom of Warrior Woman were to henceforth be heeded!

★

WHISPER TRAIL

by Frank Marks

Sometimes a man can be driven by bitterness, as well as by love.



LOOKING through the open doorway of her ranchhouse kitchen, Vera Randall hesitated with her dishes when she saw the rider stop in the arched gateway out at the roadside. She dropped her dish cloth and wiped her hands when he drew on the reins to turn his dun pony into the path leading to the house.

Feminine pride made her hurry to the mirror and turn back a few curls and mop the perspiration from her face. Living alone, a visitor was always a bit exciting, a chance for new conversation, even though he might be a fugitive, and most likely this rider was.

Vera often wished her place were farther away from the 'whisper trail'—that trodden path to Tumbleweed, the sanctuary where the outside law ran into a stonewall in the person of Bull Thurston who promised any renegade

protection as long as the owlhooter paid his tithe while he remained in town.

When the stranger reached the kitchen door he pushed back his Stetson and wiped his dust-covered face with the bandana hanging loosely about his neck. "Morning ma'am," he greeted. "Is the boss around?"

She looked up at the rider, slim waisted but broad at the shoulders from which an unbottoned vest hung limply over his plaid shirt. The man looked travel weary, and his face showed that a razor hadn't touched it for several days. His lips held an expression like a melancholy smile, not the hard sinister line of the many who stopped at her gate. "I'm the boss," Vera said.

He looked her over curiously, a slim but wiry girl appearing quite capable with the sleeves of her gingham blouse rolled above her elbows, and with faded tight jeans covering her legs. The rider's glance shifted to the corral and over the sagebrush land. "You run the spread alone?" he asked.

Vera nodded. "It's just a place to live, not really a spread."

He stared as if wondering why she was out here alone in this desolate region, then he said, "I've been riding all night; thought I might get some breakfast here, and maybe wash up a bit." When she didn't immediately reply he added, "I'm not a chuck rider, ma'am, I have money."

Vera smiled sadly. All these strange riders going to Tumbleweed had money, gold dust or loot gained with the aid of a sixgun, and as she looked into the steady gray eyes of this man with the sun-scorched light hair, he seemed to instill a spark of interest deep within her, and she felt a strange concern that never bothered her at other times when travelers stopped at her door. And then, realizing how foolish it was for her to be entertaining a moment's thought for this probable renegade, her lips tightened and she jerked her thumb toward the corral. "You'll find hay in the shed, and there's a wash trough under that yellow windmill."

"Thank you, ma'am," the rider said, and loped away from the kitchen door.

Indifferent as she tried to be, Vera couldn't smother the spark of interest that this stranger engendered, nor could she stop the quickening of her pulse as she fried bacon and cracked eggs and warmed over a pan of biscuits. The fragrant odor of coffee brought a smile to the stranger's face when he poked his head into the kitchen. "That sure whets a man's appetite," he said.

Vera turned from the stove to see him in the doorway, a young man of soft features and now shaved and wearing a fresh shirt. "Come in and get it," she said.

THE LONELINESS of the stuffy kitchen seemed to be relieved by the presence of the stranger eating on the opposite side of the table, and a vision of companionship was projected before her, of what life might be even on the fringe of this lawless community. She waited until he was through the meal before she said, "You're heading for Tumbleweed, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Name of Steve Grover, from Cliffville, and I'm looking for a party."

Vera glanced at his hosltered sixgun, and then said, "My name is Vera Randall. And you're the law." She looked at him steadily, and feeling of thankfulness passed over her, only to be supplemented with another anxiety—the fact that lawmen quickly found a permanent residence in Tumbleweed—in Boothill.

"Why do you think I'm the law?" Steve Grover asked.

Because two types of riders pass here. Lawman and renegade. You're looking for a party. So, you're the law."

Steve Grover built a cigarette and lighted it. "And if it were a renegade?"

"You'd be just as welcome to the breakfast."

Steve got up from the table. "Which means I'll be on my way."

She suddenly realized she didn't want this wholesome Steve Grover to leave. "Sit down, please," she said, and poured him more coffee. Their eyes met, and held as he looked up at her curiously. She sat down close beside him and took his arm. "Look, Steve, you must know that Tumbleweed is Bull Thurston's town and you face death from his guns, every lawman does, and the party you're looking for becomes secondary once you enter Bull's stronghold.

"I'm wearing no badge," he said.

Vera's mouth dropped, and a new

emotion disturbed her. "Th—then you're a renegade!"

Steve smiled. "I guess I'll have to make myself clear. I was the town marshal in Cliffville; that town's run by Luke Cameron, the banker. His son, Eddie Cameron, a no-good loafer was killed in a card game by a gunslick name of Spade Grosett. Grosett got the drop on me and made his getaway. I turned in my badge before I started on his trail. It's a personal matter now."

Vera's searching eyes stared into his before she said, "It must be personal, awfully personal. There's a girl in it, isn't there?"

"There was a girl, Leila Cameron, the banker's daughter. We were to be married."

"Were to be, and now—"

Steve shrugged. "Leila, and her father, too—they turned sour on me because I didn't get Eddie's killer."

There was a tinge of sarcasm in Vera's tone, "And now you're being noble, you're going after this Grosett to reinstate yourself in Leila's good graces."

"A man's duty—"

"Duty!" Vera interrupted. "As town marshal your duty ends in Cliffville. You're out to kill—and that's murder!"

"I just can't see it that way, ma'am besides, why do you care?"

Vera suddenly jumped to her feet. "I *don't* care. I—I just can't bear to see—"

"A dog shot down," Steve supplied with a smile.

She stood there, swallowing nervously, looking at him earnestly, and then lowering her eyes. She couldn't understand her own emotions, why she feared for this stranger, and why her heart had quickened from the first moment he had stood in her kitchen doorway.

SHE FELT herself envious of a person she had never seen, this Leila Cameron he had mentioned. A banker's daughter, and no doubt a smug figure in the community where her father was political boss, and now she was probably sitting blithely in her luxury while this guileless admirer hit the whisper trail to face death from a smoking gun.

Vera realized that Steve was at the cross roads but must go on. In his present position he wouldn't return to Cliffville, and she found herself hoping he never would. And as she stood there, seemingly so alone, so fearful of his life, her wistful eyes must have awakened some longing within Steve Grover probably the apparent candor of this new-found girl in comparison with Leila Cameron, or perhaps Vera was the last communion of sympathetic kinship before he went on to Tumbleweed, and uncertainty.

Impulsively he grasped her in a tight embrace, and for a brief moment Vera stiffened, only to relax and rest against him when his lips approached her own, and his kiss became a warm reality. She felt her own heart pounding wildly and circled her arms around his neck.

In another moment they were apart, an abashed expression on their faces like two truant children. "I'm sorry," Steve murmured. "I don't know why I did that. Now I'm sure it's time for me to ride." Sheepishly he left the kitchen and strode to the corral... In a few minutes he was back, and in the saddle. "Well, it's *adios*—for the time."

Vera rested her hand on the horse's nose as he looked up at Steve anxiously. "Not for long, and I'll be waiting to cook you another breakfast." He stared thoughtfully for a moment, then reined his pony around and loped toward the road...

AT THE ARCHED gateway Steve turned and waved to the girl standing outside the kitchen door, and a reluctance to leave this haven weighed upon him as he headed toward Tumbleweed. He wondered what possessed him to take her in his arms and kiss her, a stranger. But

her warm lips, and her anxiety over his safety was a bond that created a new warmth within him, a feeling of companionship that had died under the accusing eyes and scornful tongue of Leila Cameron.

Riding the few miles that separated Vera Randall's small spread from Tumbleweed, Steve now realized that his vain boast back in Cliffville to bring back Spade Grosett without himself wearing a badge had been prompted by pride, and as Vera had said, to reinstate himself in the good graces of the banker's daughter.

And now as his memory reflected the past, he knew definitely that Leila Cameron had no good graces. She was selfish and snobbish, and with guile intended to make him feel that a man in his meagre position was fortunate in being recognized by a girl so high in her social position.

With such bitterness awakened within him, Steve entered the desert town of Tumbleweed and rode along its Main Street. It was noonday and the vertical rays of the sun were eye-straining contrast to the dark areas beneath the wooden awnings over the plank walks, now almost deserted.

A hot wind blew in from the sageland and a dust devil spiraled up to his mount's nose to make the animal shake its head and snort. A metallic clang emerged from the blacksmith shop. The harness maker working on a saddle looked through his open doorway as Steve passed by. A girl raised her parasol and hesitated to give him a sly glance as she came out of Simeral's Mercantile; three guests, their armchairs tilted back against the front wall of the 'Yucca Hotel' made remarks to one another.

Steve continued to ride along the two blocks to the end of the street, and then turned back. Quite a good looking town, he thought, and then wondered what should be his first move to locate Spade Grosett, and just how he might avert a gun battle and still take the killer a prisoner back to Cliffville. And that reminded him of Vera Randall's warning—his inevitable encounter with the town boss, Bull Thurston.

Spade Grosett would have to be smoked out, and the most logical place to start the smoke would be one of the five saloons of the town, and Steve didn't know which was Bull Thurston's, the most likely of the five where he might get a line on the killer.

He reined in at the hitchrail of the Elite Restaurant and wrapped the reins over the bar. Steve went in, shoved between the shoulders of two men and seated himself on a stool. The place was hot and buzzed with flies and smelled of greasy cooking. A streaky haired blonde looked over the counter. "Apple pie and coffee," Steve said.

When he had finished eating and paid the waitress who had moved near the front window where the cash register set, Steve jerked his head toward the other side of the street to where a big sign read, *The Nugget*. "Whose place is that?" he asked.

The blonde stared at him for a moment. "Mister, you sure brand yourself a stranger. That's Bull Thurston's place."

OUTSIDE, Steve stopped at the hitchrail and looked toward the opposite saloon as he built a cigarette. Thumbing a match to his smoke he crossed the street and stepped up onto the plank walk. He pushed in the batwings and entered the *Nugget*. Over the threshold he hesitated to get accustomed to the dim light. Only a few men were at the bar, a long mahogany barrier which the bald-headed and white-aproned barkeep mopped with a rag until Steve approached and said, "Bourbon."

The barman set out bottle and glass. Steve poured his drink, and hung his heel over the footrail. Partly turning he looked over the interior. One side was equipped with the gaming

layout and the other side was a dance floor. The place was quiet save for the elaborately carved music cabinet whose slotted metal disk was playing the "Blue Danube" in response to a two-bit coin.

Steve turned back to the bar and sipped his liquor, and gazed into the back mirror which reflected the card tables. They were unoccupied except for one where four men played poker, and as their images grew sharper Steve felt his nerves jump and his pulse quicken. The player facing the bar was Spade Grosett.

Steve stared into the mirror without blinking a lash, without the movement of a muscle. Grosett's eyes were riveted on the mirror, and Steve realized his own disadvantage. The killer could see both front and back of him at the same time, and any movement he made, while Steve's mirror view doubled the optical distance between them.

Grosett held his unplayed card above the table. Steve set down his glass and kept his eyes on the mirror. He knew he had two things to do—turn and draw Grosett need do only the latter. But Steve realized he'd better turn before the killer got to his feet, and on the impulse of the thought Steve whirled as his hand streaked to his holster. Simultaneously Grosett's clawed at his gun butt.

The barkeep had seen the hostility of the two men and had grabbed a sawed-off shotgun and punched it with a violent shove between Steve's shoulders that knocked him off balance as two guns roared. Steve's shot went high, and Grosett's slug drilled the back mirror.

"Hold it! Both you hombres! This is something for the boss to settle." The barman, still with his menacing shotgun, reached over and took Steve's weapon. Grosett returned his iron to its holster.

A door slammed, and a man of gorilla proportions walked onto the scene. His huge shoulders bulged his frock-tail coat, a fancy vest adorned his middle and across it dangled a gold nugget from heavy watch chain. A string tie hung from the collar of his white shirt, his twill trousers were tucked into low Spanish boots. He was thick-necked, and his beady eyes looked venomously from one man to the other.

The barkeep said, "Sorry I couldn't stop the play sooner, Mr. Thurston. This jasper and Spade Grosett throwed down on each other."

Bull Thurston's voice thundered, "Who are you?"

Grosett spoke, "I'll tell you, boss. He's Steve Grover, town marshal from Cliffville."

"What do you want here?" Bull Thurston asked.

"Grosett might tell you that, too," Steve replied.

Bull Thurston looked at his damaged mirror. "Somebody pays for that." He turned on Spade Grosett. "I thought I made it clear when you come here. No gunplay in my place, ever."

"I had to protect myself, boss."

"I'll do the protecting in Tumbleweed!" Bull Thurston growled. He turned to Steve, behind whom the barkeep still held his shotgun. "Listen, friend, a lot of smart alecky lawmen have come here, and the ones who weren't smart are still here—in Boothill. You're not even a lawman, out of Cliffville. I could put you under arrest for starting a riot."

Bull Thurston pulled out his heavy watch. "You have about five hours 'till sundown. I'll be standing outside the batwings to see you ride out of town."

"I won't be riding."

"Then you won't be walking either—not for long." Bull Thurston turned to his barman. "Give him his gun."

THE BALD-HEADED barkeep passed the weapon which Steve slid into its holster. Bull Thurston, Grosett, and his companions from the card table, and the rest of the patrons were silent as Steve turned and left the resort.

He stepped down from the plank walk and crossed the street to where he had left his pony at the 'Elite' hitchrail. He paused to make a cigarette and looked over to the *Nugget,* all quiet again save for the incessant drone of the music box with the melody of the "Blue Danube" reaching him.

Steve sprang into the saddle, and as he headed along Main Street a jumpiness passed over him, and at the same time a dust devil made his dun rear. "Steady," Steve said, and realized the word was for himself as well as the horse.

At the stable where he put up his pony the liveryman asked, too casually, "Staying in town, stranger?"

Steve smiled. "Depends."

The holster stared, knifed off a sliver of plug tobacco and said no more. Steve crossed the street diagonally to the Yucca Hotel, pulled open the screen door to the lobby and approached the desk where an old timer dozed in a rocker. He jumped and looked sleepily over the top of his glasses when Steve struck the small gong.

"I'd like a room," Steve said.

The old clerk reversed the register, watched Steve sign and turned the book back to read the name. He took down a key. "Room 207, upstairs." The clerk clasped his fingers and rested his arms over the counter. "Staying in town long, stranger?"

Steve smiled at what seemed to be the stock question. "Depends," he again said.

Up in his room Steve poured water into the porcelain bowl, threw off the bandana from around his neck and washed up. He looked out along Main Street, and then off to the west toward which the now scorching sun was starting its descent. He was rolling the chamber of his sixgun when the tap sounded on the panel. Still holding the weapon he opened the door. She stood on the threshold, her features tight.

"Vera!" Steve exclaimed. "What brings you to town? Come in." He offered her the one hard chair of the room, and sat down on the bed.

"I couldn't wait at the ranch knowing what would happen here. And I just saw you coming from the 'Nugget'. Did you run in with Bull Thurston?"

Steve nodded. "Spade Grosett, too. Thurston is to be waiting in his doorway to see me ride out at sundown."

"You won't be riding, will you?"

"I told Thurston I wouldn't."

"Then it's a gun battle. Oh, Steve, I can't think of it. That's why, I rode to town. After this morning, at the ranch, I—" Her voice trailed off.

The longing for peace and security and the feel of inherent love within her seemed to find a responsive note in Steve's heart, as it had earlier in the day. He got up and put his hands upon her shoulders and looked at her earnestly. "Whatever the outcome, Vera, I would choose it again, for it has brought us together, even if only for a few hours."

It was not the impulsive spur of the moment that swayed them this time when their arms clasped each other. It was a slow and tender embrace, and when their lips met in a kiss it was as if they had always loved each other, and now were again united after a long separation. They were still with such a mutual feeling when she opened the door, and lingered as he held her hand. She was staring reflectively when she said, "I must talk with some of the townfolks before sundown..."

THE LAST long shadows fell across Main Street, the earth blended into a single hue of hazy mauve as the western heights seemed to bite off the last arc of the sun's disk. It was then that Steve, wearing two holstered guns, came down into the hotel lobby. A short man whose face looked drawn from the weight of his big drooping mustache, and who wore a star on his open vest was talking with the clerk. He approached Steve. "I'm Sheriff

Higgins," he said. "I take it you aim to fight Bull Thurston."

"I'm not running from him," Steve replied.

"Listen, friend, it's suicide. You can never match guns with Bull Thurston." The sheriff turned to the elderly clerk. "You tell him, Chet, you've seen Bull in action."

"He's lightning," Chet replied. "Bull will wait until you're right in his face before he draws—and he'll beat you twice over..."

Although it was the hour for more activity along Main Street, the plank walks were deserted, and there were no horses at the hitchrails when Steve came out of the 'Yucca Hotel'. Word of the most recent challenge by Bull Thurston had spread over town so what faces were in view were at windows and at the mouths of alleys where they waited to view the battle. As Steve moved along the walk he thought of Vera Randall and wondered where she was and if he would ever see her again.

Stepping from the plank walk Steve gained the middle of the hoof-churned roadway and proceeded slowly, straight, and with his eyes on the *Nugget* a block away. He saw Bull Thurston remove his frocktail coat and pass it to his barman beside him. Bull's two holsters flopped as he stepped from the walk and then strode to the center of the street where he stopped.

"He's going to play it close to his hangout," Steve told himself, and continued to advance. He wondered just how close Bull Thurston would let him get before the town boss started his draw. The thought gave Steve a hopeful idea. From early boyhood Steve never acquired any magic speed with a gun, but on bull's-eye accuracy, at greater distances, he had won many contests. Maybe he could play it that way now.

Passing an alley he heard a voice say, "We're with you, stranger."

"Thanks," Steve replied out of the corner of his mouth, and went on slowly. Although one foot was going before the other without any seeming effort of his muscles, there was a numbness in his legs and a quivering at his knees. A tremor chilled over him momentarily. He wasn't particularly scared, but he wondered if this was the end, and why he should be involved with an opponent with whom he had no interest, not even a duty. Spade Grosett wasn't even in the picture now. Vera said it would be that way.

Bull Thurston was standing in the same spot, hands down, confidence evident in the way he tapped the dirt with one boot toe as if he were annoyed that Steve didn't come on faster. Again Steve remembered the clerk's remarks, that Thurston allowed his man to get almost in his face to make sure of his bullets.

STEVE WENT on slowly and compared the distance to the 'Nugget' owner with targets he had centered. Would a sixgun be effective at the present range? Not yet. He kept going, his hands swinging close to the butts of his guns. Now he could hear that infernal music box, and it was again tinkling the "Blue Danube". The gold nugget glinted across Bull Thurston's middle, a good target, and so thinking Steve's hands streaked for his guns.

Steve knew by the sudden awkward movement of Bull Thurston's body that the town boss had been surprised by his long range play. But even so the man made up for it with two flashing arcs of his hands with the resultant yellow fire belching from gun barrels before Steve's weapons reached the horizontal.

Steve felt the air movement of the slug passing his neck, and he was conscious of the tiny eruption of dirt where another slug buried itself near his foot as he thumbed his own guns. And then Steve stood there with his smoking irons lowered, and his eyes staring unbelievingly Bull Thurston was reeling, groggy, and his left hand was pressed against his chest, and he

went to his knees in the dirt, but still clutched his right hand gun.

So amazed was Steve that he was hardly aware of another man who had left the *Nugget* and had run in a semi-circle until he was across the street from the saloon, advancing and menacing Steve from another angle. Steve turned from Thurston still on his knees to thumb a shot. Thurston was taking careful aim now, and more of his henchmen were emerging from the 'Nugget' batwings.

Then the feminine scream reached Steve's ears from a window. He didn't look but he knew it was Vera Randall's warning. "Behind you, Steve!" she shouted.

Steve whirled to face Spade Grosett whose pistol spat flame as Steve's guns thundered. Again Steve felt the scour of air as the slug passed his cheek, and as he saw Grosett fall forward, his face in the dirt. At the same instant Steve tightened his jaws as the searing lead tore between his own shoulder blades, and in that fraction of a second he knew the bullet from Thurston's gun had reached its mark.

A nausea welled deep in his stomach, and a giddiness made Main Street spin like a sparking pinwheel at a fireworks show. He groped at the air and found no support and he felt himself sinking while it seemed there was gunfire from everywhere—windows, rooftops, the alleys. Then Steve felt as if he were floating away lightly.

Steve was awfully tired, and he seemed weak when he slowly opened his eyes and stared. He saw her then, her face close to his. He was on his back, his head deep in a pillow, and there was a wince of pain when he stirred.

"Steve," she said throatily, "just go back to sleep. The doctor says you're going to be okay real soon."

He remembered everything then, the gun battle in the street, the slug from Thurston's gun in his shoulder... He glanced through the window and saw the yellow windmill back of the corral and he knew where he was. But he felt too weak to talk, so he closed his eyes. "Tell me everything," he murmured.

"You know most of it, dearest. You got Grosett. You wounded Bull Thurston. A rifle-bullet from the housetop finished him. The townfolk were with you after I talked with them before the shooting. There's a growing element in Tumbleweed, a good one. They needed a leader to break Bull Thurston's rule. You proved yourself with them, Steve. They want you for sheriff. Poor old Sheriff Higgins went down trying to protect you."

Vera's eyes were moist when she bent down and kissed him.

★

"You're too green, kid; you'll be a good catcher some day, but right now..." That's what they told Eddie — but hadn't all the great backstops been green once?

BABY AT THE PLATE by Richard Brister

This gripping story of today's baseball is in the June issue of

SUPER SPORTS

BRAND-NEW SHERIFF

by Art Kercheval

Dade Prescott promised Madge he'd get her that house on the hill . . . and wondered if he'd lose his soul doing it.

DADE PRESCOTT pulled in his ribby dun saddler, silently cursing again his bleak future. His weary eyes brushed over his strawberry-blonde bride, and he didn't like it that she was so eternally gay. She couldn't possibly mean it, now that they had uprooted everything they called home. Now that he must cross

guns with a man, whom he'd never met before. But she sang and she tooled their rickety wagon—filled with their few possessions—like the veteran she was. He wanted to rip the new sheriff's star from his shirt. Fifty dollars a month! Chicken feed!

"Madge, I promised you a better deal than this!" He shoved back his grimy Stetson, and sleeved away sweat. "I aimed to do big things with that patch of ground."

Straight-backed she sat that wagon seat and lithely she handled the ribbons, a tall young woman looking dead ahead at life. In her steady blue eyes there was tiredness, too. But a happiness was in her, from her pearl-gray sombrero to her black Justin boots.

"So you did all you could!" she snapped, still not looking at him. "So it was a worthless dry-land claim and you raised nothing but dust. You had sense enough, Dade Prescott, to pull out of there."

"But what have we got now?" he protested heatedly. "I'm sheriff of this county—at swamper's wages. We're going to Rim City to live, like a couple of always-hungry dogs. If we're lucky we'll have a roof over our heads—some old tumbledown adobe shack, likely, down in a hog waller. Half an hour after I get there, you'll be a widow, maybe. They say Monte Strang is plumb rapid."

"You'll make a topnotch lawman, Dade." She twisted and faced him. Her travel-hot features held a tightness of pride. "You'll even take Strang, and others like him, in stride. The rest will take care of itself."

They went on in silence. Dade was at least glad desolation and sagebrush and dried-up crops were far behind them. The cool and timbered beginnings of the Kicking Horse Hills were around them suddenly. Rim City was ahead, high up in a mountain meadow. In a way, it was like a strange new world, and he wouldn't be in it if he hadn't been what a lot of folks called a hero.

He'd shot it out with, and killed, the Big Bend Kid. For six months the outwitted ranchers on the flats had seen the wily cow thief play havoc with their herds. It amazed them when Dade Prescott, ex-cowpuncher and saddle tramp turned homesteader, came up with a fast enough gun to cope with the Kid. They were so impressed they began stumping the land for Sheriff-to-be Prescott to replace the worn-out deal up at the county seat.

Dade built up a smoke. His gun really had to be rapid this time, folks told him. Monte Strang was numbered among the swiftest, and he'd hired a couple of slick trigger hands. Strang owned the Antler Ranch in these Kicking Horse Hills. A man, Dade had heard, who was too much power. He killed and connived and stole and this end of the county was almost all unaccountably his. Dade's first job on this strange range was to shoot it out with this kingpin of crime. It was said Strang owned the last sheriff, too, until some enraged citizens pulled Jeff Tiernan out of the blankets one night and hanged him.

"Mr. and Mrs. Prescott, we been expecting you. H'ist up your paws."

Dade checked rein, seeking the owner of the voice. A man was coming down the blue-granite canyon wall to the left, gun in hand. Dade had an impulse to grab his .45, but stifled it, Madge was in his way. He raised his arms, his lips thinning and hardening. Madge obeyed likewise.

"Showing sense, ain't they, Stu? Saves us using bullets."

A second man descended the right wall with a readied gun. For a reception committee, Dade thought, they were prompt.

"Relieve this gent of his hardware, Lee," the man Stu said. "See there's no irons in the rig, too."

Dade's contempt crawled at once for these two. Lee, a thin, waspish fellow, edged forward and collected Dade's holstered weapon. Stu took it, stuffing it in waistband. Lee probed the wagon

and found no irons. Madge, they were abruptly satisfied, had no gun. Big and blocky, and probably not as stupid as he looked, Stu stepped in front of Dade and Madge, thick finger around trigger.

"You can put down your paws," Stu said, "and I'll explain. Me, I'm Stu Everett, and he's my pard, Lee Channing. We ride gun for Monte Strang. Monte aims to size you up first, Prescott. You ain't in no hurry a-tall about Rim City."

MINUTES later, they were riding the narrow canyon out. Dade led on the dun, clamping angry mouth over his oaths before they exploded. Madge followed in the wagon. Everett and Channing, in their saddles now, brought up the rear.

Dade wished Madge wasn't along. He might have taken a chance any time. But maybe the job wasn't worth it, he quickly reminded himself. Not for fifty bucks a month, it wasn't. Let the county bigwigs get somebody else to do their dirty work. Maybe there was still some idiot who would wear this cheap tin badge.

The canyon broke out suddenly upon a vast frontyard. Dade surpressed a whistle. So this was Monte Strang's layout. The man had done right well by himself.

"Your woman will keep back," Stu said. "Lee, stick with her."

Dade slapped an anxious glance at Madge. That too-hopeful look of hers told him to go ahead. Lee Channing wouldn't dare put a hand on her, it said, and the Prescotts, man and wife, had to play the cards dealt them. Dade steeled himself then, against jumping these gunmen, with meaningless fists.

He jogged on, needled by a helplessness, the big rock ranchhouse just ahead. He almost forgot, now, that Stu's gun was a constant threat. It amazed him that one man could amass so much. Here was grass unlimited. Strang would have more cows than he could possibly count. Strang knew how to operate.

Fifty bucks a month! Dade would grovel and scratch for every measly coin of it, and what could he buy for Madge and himself? Madge would always have to wear made-over dresses, that was what. Table fixings would be lean. They could never go to a dance or a social. It had been that way on the dry-land claim; and it would be worse when he took over his new duties in Rim City.

All of a sudden, he sat erect in saddle. It hit him hard that he was the sheriff of this Strang-ruled country right now! Madge had said he would make a first-rate lawman. And, by George, he would! If he triggered himself out of this present mess!

Monte Strang was large, bristling, active. These were Dade's first impressions, as Stu halted him, there in front of the verandah. The man came slowly down the steps, a speculative look in his dark eyes. He had a ruddiness, a bluntness—an obvious sweeping confidence. His thumbs were hooked around his cartridge belt.

"Easy plucking, boss." Yawning, Stu tossed Dade's gun. The rancher caught it up, waistbanding it with a briskness. He stared at Dade. Stu played in his saddle, his weapon still drawn.

"Star on your shirt," Strang said. "So you're the great Dade Prescott."

"So you're the great Monte Strang." Dade eased in the leather.

"We understand each other that much." Strang stood in a wide imposing stance. "We're both big men, in these parts. Only, I'm wondering if you might not have been misinformed."

"They told me it would be quite a chore, going after Strang." Dade reached for makings; then decided against them. "But seeing what happened to the Big Bend Kid, they banked on me."

"Sheriffing material," Strang nodded. "Usually they pick any sucker fool enough to run—and sometimes they turn out smart and sometimes they don't. You interest me more than most of 'em. Even," he added, "if you've got some things wrong."

"I don't think so." Dade kept his voice even. "I've already gathered the picture, complete. Rim City has a history of sheriffs who've knuckled down to you. Those who wanted to live and make a few extra greenbacks soon saw it your way. If they balked at the idea, they faced you or your hired triggers. They were never fast enough to win."

"But you figure you are." The Antler owner's eyelids puckered. "You did it to the Kid, and you might even do it to me. And Everett and Channing. But you'll never get the chance, don't you realize it? Hardly had you hit this part of the range, before my two men got the drop on you. Means the breaks have begun to go against you. Means you better listen, real hard."

Dade was listening, and thinking. He thought about Madge; new dresses every year; the table piled with steaming, appetizing food; places to go. The thrilling dream took shape, grew.

"You can go higher than any of 'em," Strang said. "Only thing you can't do is go higher than me. I'm always needing a sheriff on my side. It keeps me where I am. And it helps me rise. How about that, Prescott? Your wife, any moment now, may be a widow. Play your politics my way—and prosper."

"Monte Strang's sheriff," Dade breathed heavily. "Maybe it's what I've been after."

"Think it over fast," Strang said then. "I won't give you any more time. Mr. and Mrs. Prescott will have the finest set-up in Rim City. A big, fancy house on the hill. A spanking-new red-wheeled buggy. The steppingest horses, and silver-mounted saddles. Friends all around."

"I'll make up my mind quick, then," Dade said, startled at himself. "I'll be your man."

Strang came over, face working up a smile, and he gripped Dade's hand. He gave Dade's gun back to him. A sealing gesture, that was. Without a word, Dade holstered it.

"Ride on to Rim City, Prescott—you and your wife. You're on Antler's payroll from here out. But do nothing about that, till you hear from me."

Dade nodded, and he neck-reined the dun. Stu Everett watched him quizzically, he was aware, and he had stowed his gun. Dade rode back to Madge in a kind of daze. It was so new. It was so right, what he had done.

LEE CHANNING still sat his saddle, fishing for makings, Madge alongside in the wagon, when he returned. Channing stared at the retrieved gun. He made a grab for his own—but decided against it.

"Hmmm, happens like it usually does with new sheriffs. Means I can leave you two."

They watched Channing ride to the ranch, and now Madge spoke up: "That was awful quick, your coming back with all your skin and no bullets heard from, Dade Prescott."

He didn't say anything as they went on. Madge tooled the wagon in silence. But, he could tell, she was building words. And they came out, at last.

"Dade, are you going to do it?"

He blinked, and swallowed, and groaned. "You see through me again."

"I always have. You don't know how to hide anything, Dade."

"I'm a Strang man." He allowed the words to lie on the warm air. "I don't know just how much that means. But I'll certain soon find out."

"Butter on our bread," she said. "Chicken and dumplings, sometimes. Lace curtains, and a bedspread. That's the big part of what you'll tell me it means."

He swerved his horse and faced her, his spunky blue-eyed bride of a few weeks, and he knew she was a bit beyond him. It was part of why—he guessed—he loved her.

"Meaning enough, Madge," he told her, suddenly, bitterly. "You'll not do without those things."

She looked at him, then. "If you say so, Dade. Seems I married you for what you are."

"Right," Dade said emphatically. "A

man and woman going places. Let's roll, honey. Rim City, get an eyeful!"

He felt more jubilant about it. For the first time in his life, he had opportunity. No more grubbing for two-bit pieces. The Prescotts were real folks in this country. Except for Monte Strang, they didn't have to hunker to anybody. He could take a lot of Strang, for this. Dade saw a clear picture. Play the man's politics; peddle him confidential information now and then; call acts of self-defense murders and vice versa—e v e r y t h i n g that furthered Monte Strang.

The wagon trail rose with the Kicking Horses. They topped the bald summit, and sweeping green grandeur was over all the lowlands. Most of it belonged to Strang. Once, other people had been here, with their hopes, with their strong minds and hands, with their fight to overcome adversities. But Monte Strang used all the methods of acquiring their lands. Not the least among these was a man with a badge and fresh out of a conscience.

Below was Rim City. It sprawled in the sun, friendly looking from where they sat, and it would spring to its feet soon and welcome the new lawman and his bride. Maybe, in its twisted way of thinking, a half hundred shining bucks every month was good pay for riding out and shooting somebody. If you got shot, it gave you an extra shrug of the shoulders.

Dade started down the trail, Madge following. But, abruptly, he pulled up.

"Whoa up," he called.

Madge hauled back on the reins. "Now what?"

"I'm thinking," he said, "of earning fifty dollars!"

"Dade!" Her eyes widened. "Something's bit you!"

"We'll do without 'em!" he decided, to himself. "A house on the hill, I mean, and chicken and dumplings and the red-wheeled buggy. Even if we always have to do without 'em!"

He had spoken sharply and she glanced up. Her eyes glowed now with swift new pleasure. Already he was twisting around, and riding back toward Antler. Ace teamster Madge Prescott turned the wagon, cracking her whip for speed.

He didn't understand it, exactly, didn't try to at the moment. Before long, he'd be facing three-to-one odds. Madge was being left out of this picture. He'd lose her in his distant dust. She screamed at him to wait, but he paid no heed.

The dun was covering ground. They thundered back along the rock-and-tree-cluttered trail. Dade checked his gun as he rode. He leathered it, satisfied. He weaved into a walled ravine.

"A mistake, Mister, putting up the gun!"

The man shouldn't have said it first. It gave Dade a chance to rear his mount before the shot rang down and clipped off his hat. Dade's gun was out and flaming upward even as he got the dun bounced back to earth. Lightning Colt fire—that had toppled the Big Bend Kid—once more found an elusive target. A hole was between Stu Everett's eyes before he could spring behind his boulder. He came tumbling halfway downslope.

DADE HOLSTERED. His lips setting in bleak lines, he rode on. But he looked around, more careful.

"Wait, Dade! Wait!"

His delay had let her catch up! He swore at himself! He yanked to a halt.

"I picked it this way," he intoned harshly. "I got to go on with it."

"They'll kill you, Dade!"

"I'm the sheriff." He was impatient. "I'm no slouch with a gun."

He broke away from her, riding harder. He swung off the wagon trail.

Strang's smart, he cautioned himself. *A new sheriff gets the test before he's trusted. Everett follows me, wary. When I don't obey Strang's order—and I don't ride into Rim City—Everett talks guns.*

Dade left his wife far behind. He was close to Antler headquarters, and Strang and Channing might have heard

the blasts. He rounded the bend, scanning the widening defile—

"You came back for me, Prescott?"

Dade jerked rein and stiffened. Monte Strang, big and impressive as ever, stood wide in the middle of the trail!

"Too bad you are foolish," Strang said. "You could have made a good Strang man."

"Maybe," Dade murmured it, "I don't need a red-wheeled buggy!"

On the heels of his words, he went for his own gun. It was all the chance he had. As he whipped it free—a crashing something hit him from behind. But he made his own Colt hammer out in desperation as he was slumping from leather. He thought he saw the bullet go into Strang.

His spill caused the man behind to miss the second time, lead shrilling over Dade's hair. But Dade managed to roll in the trail and squeeze his last strength into the trigger. It was Lee Channing and he watched him wilt. Then the blackness galloped up to overtake Dade....

They moved on to Rim City, Madge still tooling the wagon, Dade's lean legs clamped around the dun. But they stopped at Caper Creek to water the horses and he eased to earth. He winced a little. She scrambled down and inspected the wound again.

"Bullet glanced off a rib," she repeated. "You were lucky, all around."

He marveled at that. His bullet did get Strang.

"You'll live," she said, "to be shot to smithereens. As long as you're Kicking Horse's sheriff—"

"I'll be a topnotch one." He took her in his arms—made a decisive period with a kiss.

"And we'll stretch fifty measly bucks," she insisted. Dreaming eyes looked ahead.

They traveled on; he agreeing emphatically, now, that the hard way was the way of any man—and his tall and spunky woman who waited for her man to do right—toward riding out their dreams. Rim City had bought itself a lawman...

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SWEETHEART OF WISHING CREEK

One had to be sure, in the dangerous game Nedra was playing . . .

by Lee Floren

NEDRA WAS wiping the supper dishes when she heard the men arguing in the farmhouse yard. She listened, her blue eyes worried, the dishtowel refusing to move across the clean surface of the chipped old plate.

Her father, she realized, was arguing with young Dan Murray.

She hung up the dishtowel and crossed the living room, stooping to peer out the window. The voice of her father was even louder now; Ben Travis hammered one fist into the palm of the other.

"So you claim you or your men didn't run off my three steers, eh, Murray? You didn't cut my fence an' run off my steers? Then, if you didn't, who did the dirty trick, Murray?"

Nedra listened, heart beating heavily.

Dan Murray was twenty-two, a year old than she, and he had brown wavy hair that peeped out from under his old Stetson. He had a straight nose and a stubborn set to his jaw, also, he owned the big Circle S outfit. From what Nedra had heard, Dan's father had died two years ago, leaving him the immense cow-outfit. Nedra had

never met Dan's father for she and her dad had taken up there Wishing Creek farm only a year ago.

"I don't know who stole your steers, Mr. Travis, but I do know they were not stolen by my Circle S outfit, sir. I heard talk in town that you were handing out accusations against my outfit and I came by to tell you we didn't steal your stock."

Nedra thought, *He's telling the truth. His voice is earnest and it has cost him a lot to ride in here—him a cowman—to talk to a common nester.* Or—was he telling the truth?

She had met Dan a number of times, always at local dances. He was a good dancer, and he joked a lot; the last time, he and she had had midnight supper, and they had gotten along very well. Now, for some reason, her heart beat a little too heavily. She blamed it on the fact that Dan and her father might come to blows.

"You tellin' me the truth, Murray?"

"I don't lie, sir."

She detected a stern note—almost a warning note—in Dan's suddenly harsh voice. He came from an old family of cow-folks and he did not like to have his word doubted. This showed in his voice.

"I'd like to believe you, Murray."

"I tell the truth," Dan repeated.

Again her father pounded his palm. "All right, look at it this way, Murray! You own the biggest cowoutfit around here. You run on free gover'ment grass. Your father ran his cattle also on free range."

She saw Dan nod. His brown eyes could dance with happiness, and they could turn to a slate-brown, too, when angry. Just now they were slate-brown. He saw her looking out the window and then he looked back at her father.

"Come to the point, Mr. Travis, please?"

"Us farmers moved in and took up homesteads an' put fences around land you had run cattle over for years. You don't want us farmers in here and you know it, Murray!"

"I've never lifted a hand against you or the other farmers!"

Nedra heard her father's voice raise. "Somebody is raisin' a hand against me, Murray! First, I lost a milk cow, best cow I had—took her all the way from Ohio to here! Never did find her. Then I lost a team of work-horses; never found them, either. Now I lost them three head of steers! I'm damned near broke, Murray, and I think you'd like to see me broke; I'd have to leave the country then!"

"You're almost accusing me of stealing your stock, Mr. Travis."

Nedra had heard enough. She ran across the porch and got her father by an elbow, forcibly turning him. "Dad, don't say too much, please!"

Her father's pale blue eyes were furious. "This young button has a lot of gall a-ridin' in here big as life an' twict as bold, daughter! If the Circle S ain't stealin' our stock, then who is?"

"You're calling me a rustler!" Young Dan Murray clipped his words. "I came over as a good neighbor, attempting to help you. Instead, you accuse me of rustling your steers. You're new to this country, Travis, but you've put the dirtiest charge against me that a man can put against another man!"

NEDRA HUNG onto her father's arm. She was almost as strong as Ben Travis, and the thought came that her father had lost a lot of weight in the last three years—ever since her mother had died. The death of Mary Travis had taken a lot of ambition and life out of her father.

"He doesn't mean it, Dan." She was pleading for sanity to return to the two angry men. "He's been working hard and he's nervous and tired, Dan. Please get on your horse and go!"

His brown eyes met her pleading blue eyes.

"Neither me or any of my hands

are causing trouble with you farmers, Miss Nedra."

"I—I believe you, Dan."

His smile was a pretty thing. It sent little lights into his eyes, pushing out the hard flecks of brown. "I'm glad you do, Nedra." Dan Murray spoke to Ben Travis now. "Remember, Mr. Travis, this is a mystery to me, too. I want to be your neighbor; there is no percentage of us being enemies. I have plenty of grass for my cattle. You can raise hay for me to winter-feed my cattle, and I'll be glad to buy it."

"You talk nice, Murray."

Nedra asked, pleadingly, "Please go, Dan, and let me handle this."

He found his stirrup. "All right, Nedra." He swung into saddle, a lean, sun-bronzed young rider with a ready smile. His eyes met hers and he said, "Goodby, folks." He turned his blood-bay and loped down the road and out of the gate.

Nedra released her grip on her father's arm. "Dad, I'm ashamed of you!"

The anger had left Ben Travis. A man of sudden temper, he was almost shame-faced now; still, he had vestiges of his anger. These traces were stern in his voice when he said, "If him or his Circle S hands never stole our stock, then who the hell is robbin' us farmers, Nedra?"

"I don't know. But I feel sure it isn't Dan Murray."

Ben Travis looked at the dust cloud left by Dan Murray's running horse. Then his eyes swung back to his daughter. "You called him *Dan,* didn't you?"

"Yes, that's his given name."

"He called you Nedra."

"Nedra is *my* name. Remember?"

"You've only met a coupla times yit you two sure seem to be old friends."

"We had supper at the last dance. Don't overwork your poor imagination, Dad, please..."

She walked into the house.

Her father winked at the cat. "I done trailed them stolen steers all the way to the Lost Hills. I lost their tracks on them lava beds there. I'm tired, girl."

BEN TRAVIS was drinking a cup of black coffee when, a few minutes later, a buckboard rolled into the yard, its wheels lifting dust. It was a fancy new buckboard pulled by a team of high-stepping black horses. The farmer lowered his coffee cup and squinted through the shiny-clean window. "Thet danged lawyer, Martin Dunlap."

"Wonder what he wants?"

"I don't know what he wants but I know danged sure he ain't gonna git it. I don't like thet slick fella."

"He seems like a gentleman."

Ben Travis snorted. He pushed back his chair. "Reckon I'll go out and talk to his royal Nibs."

"I'll go with you."

"I don't need your help. Stay in the house where you belong."

Martin Dunlap was a well-groomed heavy-set young man who was still unmarried. He had said that no woman he had met was good enough to become Mrs. Martin Dunlap. He placed the buggywhip in the socket.

"Well, Miss Nedra. How is our schoolteacher today?"

"Just fine, sir."

Dunlap looked at her father. "I heard you had lost some more steers, Mr. Travis. I saw Dan Murray head this way out of town. I drove out to see he caused no trouble."

"Mighty thoughtful of you," Ben Travis said.

Martin Dunlap could not help but detect the irony in the farmer's voice. But his jowls changed not a bit in color.

"Seeing I completed legal requirements for your homestead, I have your interest at heart, Mr. Travis."

"Thanks, Dunlap."

"Did you find your steers, sir?"

"Trailed them into the Lost Hills an' lost sign of them. Somebody is stealin' cattle an' horses off'n us nesters to break us so we have to leave this country. That's as plain as a man's hand in broad daylight."

Dunlap showed a thin smile. "That is a tough accusation to put against Dan Murray, sir."

"Might be tough, but it's true."

Dunlap moved in the seat, the springs creaking. "Then there is nothing I can do, Mr. Travis?'

"Not a thing."

Dunlap lifted his flat-brimmed black hat. "Then goodby it is, folks. If there is anything I can do along the legal line I shall indeed be glad to help you." His eyes fastened on Nedra who became very conscious of the wind blowing her gingham dress against her legs. "Good day, Miss Nedra."

"Good day, Mr. Dunlap."

Then the buckboard was rolling out of the yard, dust lifting behind it, the blacks prancing. And Ben Travis mocked, "Good day, Miss Nedra. Good day, Mr. Dunlap."

Nedra colored. "You must remember that Mr. Dunlap is on the school board, and the school board pays my wages!"

"Good day, Mr. Dunlap," her father mocked again, eyes twinkling.

Nedra fled into the house.

THE NEXT day was Friday. She had one new student, a boy of ten, who caused her some trouble, and she visited his home. He lived on the outskirts of the little cowtown. He was home alone.

"Where are your parents?"

"Ain't got none."

"You must have a father and mother."

"Ma is dead. Pa is out in the hills."

They had a little talk and Nedra left the old shack, wondering if she had won him over to her side. Lawyer Martin Dunlap met her, said, "You been down to see that newcomer, eh?"

She got the impression, suddenly, that he had been spying on her. But why? "Nobody was home but young Will, and we had a long talk. Who is his father, Mr. Dunlap?"

"Don't know, Nedra. Newcomer here."

He put his hand on her elbow and they went to the schoolhouse, where he saddled her horse and helped her into saddle. She felt a little embarrassed by his earnest attention, and she found herself blushing.

"Thank you, Mr. Dunlap."

Dunlap switched his cigar. "Your father find any trace of those missing steers, Nedra?"

"Nothing, so far."

"Too bad."

She glanced back as she loped across the prairie. He stood where she had left him and he was watching her. It was four miles from the schoolhouse to their homestead, and she met Dan Murray about a mile from her home. Murray had riden in from the northwest, she noticed. The stolen steers had been driven that direction. She liked the clean-cut boyishness of Dan, and she found herself comparing Dan and Martin Dunlap. Dan was boyish, smiling; Dunlap was worldly, mature. She liked Dan the better, but she kept her voice cold.

"Howdy, Nedra."

"Hello, Mr. Murray."

"Dan," he corrected, smilingly.

She said, "Mr. Murray."

He sighed, shrugged. "Have it as you will, young lady. Did your father ever find his missing steers?"

"No."

He turned in saddle, looked toward the rimrock ledge that hid the lava beds that stretched north for miles. "Somebody is trying to break the farmers," he said slowly. "That means somebody wants their farms for himself."

"You sure," she said cattily, "it isn't the Circle S?"

She had said the wrong thing. She had pushed him just a little too far. He reined his horse close and got both her hands in one of his. His fingers were tight on her small wrists.

"Nedra, look at me."

"Let go of me!"

But he didn't release her. His boyish face was hard with firm lines, and anger flecked his brown eyes.

"Nedra, my outfit does not want your land—for the last time, remember that, please!" The hardness left and a whimsical humor came into his eyes. "You're a lovely girl, Nedra."

She tried to push him away. His lips came down, met hers; then, for some apparent reason, she was not pushing him, she was close to him. And she found herself answering his kisses.

Finally she broke, smoothed her hair. "What ever came over me, Dan?"

"The same bug that bit me," Dan said quietly. "Nedra, you have a new boy in school, haven't you? He has only his father and the old man is named Mack Turner?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I know how to dig out facts."

Their eyes met, held. Hers blue, girlish; his brown, boyish and smiling. Nedra knew what would happen if she didn't turn her horse and ride away. She'd be back in his arms again!

"Goodby, Dan."

That night she corrected papers. Her father read and grumbled as he sat with his stockinged-feet higher than his head. She hummed and worked.

"You sound happy, daughter."

"I am."

Ben Travis eyed his daughter. "What happened to make you so happy?"

"Just glad to be alive, I guess."

THE NEXT day was Friday. She found herself remembering that Lawyer Martin Dunlap had spied on her and that Dan Murray, for some reason, seemed interested in this new unruly boy. She gave the newcomer her attention. He was a big boy for his age, and he was burly and rough. He already had whipped the school bully which, in itself, had been a good thing—but he had taken the bully's place, and that was not good. She kept him a few moments after school.

"How do you like this school?"

"Don't like it."

Well, he was honest, anyway. "What are you going to do over the week-end?"

For some reason he gave her a sudden look. "Swim an' loaf, I reckon. Why do you ask?"

"You had best catch up on your arithmetic."

"My Pa says 'rithmetic ain't necessary, 'cept to count somethin' like steers—somethin' worth money."

"Oh, I see. You're dismissed."

He went out, effecting a swagger.

She watched him go down the street. He stopped in front of the Mercantile, glanced around hurriedly, then as hurriedly ducked into the space between the store and the harness-shop, apparently taking a short-cut into the alley. Nedra was suspicious and she blamed her suspicions on the fact he had looked around to see if anybody had been watching him.

She ran out the back door, went into the little barn behind her schoolhouse, and, from the haywindow, the alley lay clear. She saw the boy enter the strip, look around again, and then he ducked into the back door of an office.

She thought, *What the heck is this?*

She watched, and about fifteen minutes later the boy came out, stuffing something in his pant's pocket. She got a glimpse of something white. He was putting an envelope in his pocket.

It worried her, and her mind kept adding up things. Before going home she rode to the Circle S to talk with Dan Murray. Dan was roping spring-

colts in the big corral and he saw her. He said, "You rope now, Shorty," and handed his lasso to a cowboy. "Howdy, Nedra."

"Dan, I want to talk to you."

"Better stay here in plain sight, then," he said, smilingly. " 'Cause I get you alone an' I'm hugging you and kissing you!"

"Dan, your cowboys might hear us!"

"Okay, sugar. What's on the female mind?"

She told him about what she had seen. He nodded, listening carefully, head canted, the sunlight reflecting from his bare head. Then he said, "Is that all, honey?"

"All, Dan."

"Don't think you got anything," he said. "How about the dance tomorrow night? You an' me, eh?"

"I wouldn't dare get in a buggy alone with you, Dan Murray!"

She was joking. He believed her. He said, "Oh, my gosh, I'm sorry, honey. What can I do—"

"Nothing!"

He stood there, an air of dejection on him, as she loped away. Nedra was smiling, and she hummed a little tune.

Foolish, stupid men!

She told her father she was going to spend the night in town with Millicent O'Shain. But she did not go to Millicent's home. She went to the hotel and the clerk did not see her climb the stairs. She sneaked into a vacant upstairs room and from here she could see the alley. She could see the door into which the schoolboy had entered and she could also see the shack he lived in. The town darkened, dogs barked mournfully, and Mr. Jackson's burro brayed with a doleful sound.

ABOUT NINE o'clock a man came out of the door, and saddled a horse and rode out of town heading northwest. Heart beating fast, she slipped down the backstairs, got her pony, and followed him. By the next time she saw him, another rider was with him—a small, slender horseman whom she recognized as the unruly schoolboy.

Something had gone wrong. She had figured the boy would ride alone, but here a man was with him. She remembered seeing her pupil leave the building and, as he had left, he had crammed a letter in his pocket. She had figured he had been commissioned to deliver that letter alone.

Was she on the right track?

She didn't know. All she could do was hope. She had used what wits she possessed, she had matched one thing against another, and it was all logical in her mind. Whether or not it would work out with such logic was another thing.

The moon rose, a yellow ball of reflected light that lighted the prairie. Once she lost sight of the pair ahead, and then she found them again—they were going toward the lava beds. And her heart quickened. She pulled her pony into a motte of timber and looked behind her. Apparently nobody followed her. One had to be sure in the dangerous game she was playing...

Suddenly, she was afraid.

Oh, how she wished Dan had paid attention to her words, and how she wished he were riding with her—big and calm Dan who could handle any emergency! She should have notified her father, too. She should not have tried to do this alone! But it was too late now to lament, for two riders were ahead of her and they were going toward the lava beds, and their three steers had disappeared in this country.

What if she turned around and got her father?

By that time, she would have lost all traces of these two riders, and she was sure they were leading her to something. With anger she remembered the sullen face of her new student. He was resentful and sulky, one who had

long had his own way; he had sat in her class, a spy for the rustlers. He had listened to her talk with the children of the other farmers and he had reported this back to his confederates. He had not attended school to learn something; he had used her class as a listening post!

She had never been in this country before. She was on the outskirts of Dan's Circle S range, surrounded by terrain she had never before visited. She followed the riders across a lava bed, and about midnight they came to a wooded valley. Down there was a cabin, for she saw a light. Her riders headed toward this cabin. She rode into the brush, tied her pony to a cottonwood tree, and went ahead on foot, carrying her rifle. She had smuggled her rifle out of the house without her father seeing it.

First, she came to a corral. Across its top bar was thrown three steer hides. Moonlight showed them clearly. With a gasp, she recognized them as coming from her three steers—the stolen steers. She was sure of that. One of the hides was from a speckled bay and gray steer, and that was from Sooky. She had raised him from a calf and now these rustlers had butchered him.

Maybe she was mistaken, though. There were lots of brockle-colored steers and maybe this hide— She went cautiously forward intending to feel the outline of the brand on the hide.

She was crossing a small clearing when somebody hit her from behind. First, she heard the rush of boots; then, a body catapulted into her back. She went ahead, gasping in pain, and she felt the corral bars stopping her. She turned, pain in her chest and she tried to raise her rifle.

Masculine hands grabbed the rifle.

They wrestled, gasping and panting, and then, suddenly, she saw the face of her opponent. It was a boyish face, twisted now by exertion—the face of her unruly student! He was stronger than she, and he tore the rifle from her grasp, throwing it to one side.

"My gosh, Pa, my schoolteacher!"

"Your—what?"

The words came from a lanky, string-bean type man who came into the clearing with moonlight reflecting from his rifle. Nedra judged he was the boy's father.

"She's followed me out from town, Pa. Her paw owned them three steers you done stole—"

"Shut your 'tater mouth, son!"

Nedra glared at the lanky man, hands knotted into fists. "Yes, and there are the hides of those steers—my steers! You didn't think anybody would find you out here in the badlands, did you?"

ANOTHER man came out of the brush, also carrying a rifle. "She's alone, men. Nobody with her, at least—I couldn't find anybody. Well, Nedra, you sure rode the wrong direction."

"You—you dirty rustling thief!"

The man smiled, his smile twisted slightly. But back of his smile was a flash of something she guessed was worry.

"Lucky you two had me on guard," her student boasted, swaggering over and picking up her rifle. "I got good ears. Gosh, now I won't have to go back to her ol' school, will I, Pop?"

"No more school for you, son. You can cock a rifle, an' that is education enough for my son."

"Can that talk," the third man snarled.

He watched her, head canted, eyes thoughtful. His hat had fallen off and she could clearly see his face. Once she had thought his face kind and friendly; now, though, it looked scheming and harsh and ugly.

"What'll we do with her?" Pop asked.

"Kill her," the boy said.

The third man said, "Yes, kill her, you saps—then what happens? The

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"Stop it, Kate!" Jim pulled her around to face him. The type scattered from her hand, spilled to the floor.

A man can fight because it's his duty as sheriff, while his heart tells him to give up — while he can still be happy.

SHERIFF WITH A HEART

Heart - Warming Novel

by Bill Severn

IT WAS ALMOST dawn before Bannock's election night tumult quieted. The great red flares of the torchlight parade flickered out and the crowd drifted away to saloons along the dust-dry main street or to homes clustered up the side of the hill behind the growing business section. Wagons carried men and women and sleepy-eyed children back to their ranches.

Jim Laramie stood in front of the weathered shack that housed the *Weekly Times & Advocate,* a tall, tired, sandy-haired young man with a weary grin and an arm that ached as he shook hands with the last of his well-wishers. Long ago, he had made his drawling speech of acceptance, saying what was in his heart and wonder-

ing how many of them understood that his pledge to end violence with law and order was more than political platitude.

The shining new sheriff's badge weighted the left pocket flap of his green plaid shirt, a light star of stamped metal, but heavy with responsibility. He hadn't wanted the badge or election to the job that went with it. Being sheriff meant giving up time from his own small ranch. It meant spending most of his hours in town.

Jim glanced at Kate, who stood beside him. Kate O'Shea, small and red-haired and with a kind of beauty that was flame-forged in the emotional fires that made her as Irish as her name. She had wanted it this way.

His eyes shifted from Kate to her father. Frank O'Shea had put the full weight of the *Weekly Times & Advocate* behind the campaign, blazing editorials at the voters, demanding Jim Laramie be drafted to bring civilization to Bannock. Frank looked like an angel had brushed wings against the fuzz of white hair around his bald dome to make it a halo of victory, as pleased as if Jim were his own son—which he would be soon, Kate willing.

Among the last to take Jim's hand was Wiley Huffler. Jim understood his reluctance. There was a time when everybody in town had thought Kate would become Mrs. Huffler. His clasp was firm and Huffler seemed sincere, despite the embarrassment that showed in the momentary darkening of his full face. His laugh was forced, but his words were as calm as when he spoke from behind the cashier's cage at the Cattlemen And Merchants Bank. "I'm behind you in this, Laramie." Huffler included Kate in his half-smile. "I reckon the best man won, all the way around."

"Thanks. I want your support." Jim meant it. "I'll need the whole town behind me."

Huffler nodded and stood there a moment as though he should say something else. "Well, it's been a big night." He kept his smile, but turned rather abruptly and moved along so the others could congratulate Jim.

Jim's glance followed Kate's as she looked after Huffler. She was embarrassed, too. Her head lifted and she laughed a little, answering Jim's unspoken question, reassuring him. "No," her laughter said, "I'm not sorry I changed my mind about Wiley, but it was nice of him to come to you like this."

They went into the *Weekly Times & Advocate* office finally, Frank closing the door and pulling the green blind to tell the town the election party was over.

"Oh, Jim." Kate held herself close. "I'm so proud of you." Her fingers squeezed his arm as he kissed her and her voice was all husky, like she had a cold or something, only he knew it wasn't that. He felt the same way.

Laughing warmly, Frank clapped him on the back. "Now, we'll have a decent town, me boy. And the devils who've been spoilin' it will get the proper hell they've been requestin'."

There was a knock on the door and a rattling of the catch. Frank cocked his eye, frowning. "Now, who can that be this late, stirrin' enough commotion to disturb the dead?"

Ivor Lang, one of Rex Burleigh's men, stood in the doorway with a bottle under each of his bandy arms and a tray in his hands. "Compliments of the boss, sheriff." Lang nodded to Jim. "Mr. Burleigh figured you and the folks would be wanting a private little celebration, so he sent over the fixings."

JIM HAD no chance to answer. Frank's curse upon Rex Burleigh and the *Queen High* saloon was explo-

sive enough to make Kate draw her breath, as accustomed as she was to her father's outbursts. Frank grabbed the platter of food and hurled it to the street. Seizing one of the bottles, Frank smashed it against the door frame, his voice high with a flood of wrath.

Lang stumbled back, took to his heels as the old man sent the second bottle spinning into the night after him. Frank slammed the door. A crack shot across the small pane of glass. The silence was as tense as another oath. Frank's hard breathing halted, picked up again as he swung around.

"Calm down, Frank." Amusement pulled Jim's mouth, but his eyes were troubled. "I know how you feel about Burleigh, but you shouldn't have done that. I don't want to start by making enemies."

"Enemies!" Frank shut his eyes. "You can stand there, cool as that, after him offerin' the insult he did?"

"If Burleigh's willing to cooperate with the law—"

"Cooperate, is it?" Frank looked pained beyond endurance. "No, me boy. Bannock didn't elect you to cooperate with the likes of Burleigh. It's cooperation from the end of a gun you'll be teachin' him, or givin' a suit of tar and feathers for him to wear when he rides the rail."

"Talk like that won't help." Jim softened his voice. "That's not the way. I have no right to break the law any more than Burleigh. If he does, I'll take him in and he'll stand trial." He put his hand on Frank's arm. "There has to be respect for the law, by everybody."

"People know what Burleigh stands for. There'll be no respect for a sheriff afraid to shoot when it's needed." Sighing deeply, he lifted his shoulder from Jim's touch.

"Jim..." Kate slipped her hand beneath his arm, her look begging him to say nothing more. "Jim's not afraid of Burleigh. You know that, dad."

Frank hesitated. "Yes, there's been enough of talkin' for the pleasure of hearin' ourselves." He stuck out his hand. "Good night, Jim." As Jim grinned and took his hand, the old man winked in Kate's direction. "Now, don't be all night congratulatin' him. 'Tis time we had our sleep." He crossed the shop between the slant-top cases that held the fonts of type and past the ink-grained stone, where the block and mallet lay beside spilled quoins. Beyond the hulk of the press, Frank opened the door to their living quarters and Jim heard him strike a match to fire the oil lamp.

Taking Kate's hands in his, Jim turned her. "I'm sorry I had words with him."

Kate frowned. "I know you'll do what's right. You can't treat Burleigh like—someone respectable. He's behind every crooked deal in town."

"Now, don't you flare up at me. Let me handle Burleigh my way, Kate. It's nothing for you to get involved in." He kissed her. For a moment, he sensed a brief reluctance, as though she were holding part of herself back from him. But it was gone before Jim could decide whether it was more than his imagination. Certainly, there was nothing reserved in the way she embraced him now. Jim felt the fire of her all through him. "Kate..."

"Darling." She touched her lips lightly to his chin and moved from him, her eyes bright with a revealing intimacy that made her lower them momentarily. There were high points of color in her cheeks and she fussed importantly an instant with the puff of her sleeve, setting the pleats just so. Glancing up, she laughed softly and shook her head. "You," she said.

He laughed and went to the door. "Sometimes, I think you're in love with me, Kate."

She wrinkled her nose. "Sometimes, I think so, too."

JIM WHISTLED as he strode along the plank walk. At the middle of the block, where the wooden awning of J. Q. Parker's General Merchandise Store broke to let in a patch of sky, he stopped and tilted his head. Shoving his flat-crowned hat out of the way, he squinted at the stars. Jim grinned and picked up the tune he had been whistling, his arms swinging time to it as he crossed the street.

The sun soon would be pinking the hills with a new day. Bannock would expect its sheriff to be on the job. Tiredly, Jim yawned and decided against riding out to his ranch. He could snatch sleep in one of the jail bunks behind the sheriff's office. There were no prisoners.

Jim fumbled in his pocket for the keys. He wasn't sure which one opened the front lock. He tried two and then struck a match, crouching down to see. The match flickered and went out. Frowning, he dropped it. The keyhole had been wadded with paper.

He felt for the matches, to strike another. There was a whisper in back of him, hardly a sound at all. His muscles tensed. Jim heard it again.

He sprang to his feet, saw the shadow behind him. Jim swung the weight of his body into the drive of his fist.

The jolt went up his arm. There was a grunt and a sucking for breath as Jim slammed into that solid shadow once more. The man stumbled, fell back. Reaching, Jim bent to jerk him to his feet.

A sudden movement pulled his eyes to the right. Too late, he realized there was a second shadow. Jim lifted his arm to break the blow. His head exploded. His teeth clamped against the pain and his eyes shot red. Jim's knees hinged under him. The club swung again. Jim sprawled on his face.

He rolled, tried to get up. Both men threw themselves upon him. Struggling, kicking, fighting with all his strength, he was pinned to the ground.

"No need to take it like that, sheriff." The voice was high, rasping, obviously the false voice of someone trying to hide his identity. "The boss wants you to have a drink. Nice and sociable. And this time, you're acceptin'."

Jim felt the cold glass neck of a bottle touch his lips. A hand clamped on his jaw and fingers held his nose. The whiskey poured into his mouth and spilled on his cheeks. Its fire burned his throat.

"He's had his drink," the voice whined. Abruptly, the pressure lifted. There was a scurrying of boots, a hard pounding, as the men ran from him.

Jim raised himself on his elbows, reached for his gun. Thumbing the hammer, he leveled it at the retreating shadows.

His hand fell. Slowly, he relaxed his fingers and lowered the gun. He didn't want the town in on it, not yet. In this light, there was little chance his shot would find its mark. But the sound of wild shooting would rouse the whole of Bannock.

What a fool he would look, lying sprawled on the ground beside a half-empty bottle, with a gun in his hand

and a wild story about shadows that had forced him to drink.

Jim painfully got to his feet and dragged himself to the plank walk. He put his hand to his head and his fingers came away wet. Gingerly, he probed the wound. The bleeding wasn't heavy, probably not more than a deep scratch.

With the blade of his pocket knife, he worked the paper wad from the door lock, found the right key. Burleigh? That was the obvious answer. Burleigh was enraged because Frank had tossed his man out of the *Weekly Times & Advocate* office and the bottles after him. Jim scratched his fingers behind his ear, trying to think it through. Somehow, that answer seemed too obvious. Burleigh wasn't a fool.

He went out and found the bottle, brought it back and put it into the drawer of his desk. Dublin Irish Whiskey. Somebody figured he was going to rip the town apart over that bottle. And somebody was wrong.

REX BURLEIGH was the type who seemed to swagger even when he sat down. He sat himself beside Jim's desk without being invited and slapped Friday's freshly-printed newspaper in front of Jim, its pages folded to the editorial Frank had written.

Jim knew what it said. He wished Frank hadn't published it. Without mentioning Burleigh by name, it called upon the new sheriff to run him out of town.

Burleigh's heavy-jowled face offered a smile. "I don't want trouble," he said, "and I know you don't." His voice was as calm as if he were discussing the weather. "But nobody's running me out of Bannock and I'm advising you not to try."

"You'll be treated under the law the same as anybody else."

"Okay, then." Burleigh held out his hand. "I know where I stand."

Jim looked at his hand. Deliberately, he ignored it. "Don't get me wrong, Burleigh. I don't like *anything* you stand for." He crossed his office and opened the door. "You played it smart, coming to me like this. I think you've got brains enough to clean up your outfit and keep them straight. But I'm warning you—don't give me an excuse to do what I'd like."

Burleigh's face darkened around his careful smile as he got to his feet. "I'm not asking special favors." He went out.

Through the dusty window, Jim watched him go along the street toward the *Queen High*. He felt the muscles tighten across his back. Swinging to his desk, Jim swept the paper into the basket. He pulled out the drawer and stared a minute at the bottle he had put there. Slamming the drawer shut, he swore.

Jim recognized the tap of Kate's small, high-buttoned shoes on the walk before she climbed the two steps to come in. Funny, how sure he could be it was Kate. He had never listened deliberately to hear the way she walked, and yet he could identify that little sound at once as part of her. He went to her and took her in his arms and he thought: even in a dark room, without a whisper from either of us, I'd know Kate was there.

But something was wrong. For a moment, he was so filled with loving her he didn't sense her refusal when he kissed her. But he took his arms away then and he saw her expression. Wordlessly, he questioned her with his eyes.

She turned her head. "Burleigh just left here," she said. "I saw him come out."

"We had a talk."

"You talked—to him?" She looked at Jim. "I'm trying to understand."

"There's nothing to understand." Jim put his hand on her arm. "I have a job and I'm trying to do it the best

I know how. Your father is asking for a kind of violence I don't want."

"He's asking for a decent town." Kate moved her arm. "I guess—he and I were wrong about you."

"Kate!"

She closed her eyes, shaking her head. "I want to believe in you. But how can I? You talk about law and evidence. If you wanted to get rid of Burleigh, you'd make your own evidence. The only law you need is your conscience."

"That would be the easy way, Kate. But it wouldn't be right." Jim stepped closer, trying to reach her eyes again with his, groping inwardly for words to make her understand. "This is something bigger than using my gun. It's a chance to show people they can live together without shooting, that they can build homes and raise families and hope for the kind of a civilized community where—" Jim's voice stilled as he saw Frank in the doorway behind Kate. The old man's face was twisted with scorn.

Frank came into the office. "Go back to the shop," he told Kate. "Somebody should be watchin' it while I'm out."

She hesitated, glancing at Jim. Softly, she said, "Yes, dad." Kate went out quickly, without turning back. But Jim heard her steps slow outside, steps that dragged with reluctant obedience.

The room was quiet. The silence charged with a tension that kept Jim from speaking. Frank broke it with no waste of words. "How much did Burleigh buy you for?"

Jim drew his breath deep, held it in his lungs. "If you weren't my friend, I wouldn't take that, Frank. It's bad enough for one of us to get hot-headed. I won't add to it."

"Then give me another reason for entertainin' Burleigh in your office, lettin' him stroll out for everybody to see how he's got you in his pocket and the devil's own grin upon his face?"

"If you and Kate think I've sold out to Burleigh, there's nothing I want to say."

"You were glib with pretty talk a minute ago. Is it havin' the people vote for you that's gone to your head? They voted for a man. So did I. And until you're ready to act like a man, you can forget about callin' me your friend." Frank turned to the door. "There's one thing more. I don't want you botherin' Kate with your attentions."

"That," Jim said, "is up to Kate."

2

JIM KNEW as he crossed the wagon-rutted street to the Cattlemen And Merchants Bank that the news of Burleigh's visit had spread from the bars to Bannock's barber shop and the livery stable and Parker's General Store. The issue was up for decision before that court of public gossip.

In the bank, conversation hushed as he stepped before the cashier's window with the draft for his pay. Jim smiled as if he didn't know they had been talking about him. He slipped the voucher beneath the iron grill for Wiley Huffler to cash.

Huffler counted the money, shoved it across the board. "I hear you and Kate had a fight."

Jim frowned. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Folks are sayin' a lot of things." Huffler leaned forward. "Kate decided between us once, Laramie. I want her to be happy and if you're the man for her then that lets me out. But I reckon you know I'm still in love with her."

"Meaning?"

"If Kate wants to change her mind, then I'm doin' everything I can to

take her from you. Maybe you're playin' square about Burleigh." Huffler made a tiny shrug. "But if Kate feels she can't believe in you, I'm not arguin' it with her."

"Don't set your hopes too high." Jim counted the bills and pocketed them. "Kate won't change her mind."

Huffler looked at him directly. "I hear she has," he said.

Jim met his look with a grin, but he wished he felt that sure. Going down the bank steps, he halted and glanced along the street. Deciding, he turned toward the *Weekly Times & Advocate* shop. He hoped Kate would be alone, without Frank there to kindle her temper.

He saw as he opened the door that he was in luck. Kate was at one of the type cases, setting letters in that upside-down stick and wearing a printer's apron sizes too big. Cute and tiny and with a smudge of black ink at the tip of her nose. But there was nothing doll-like in the look she gave him.

"There's a dance tonight," Jim said. "At the courthouse."

"I know." Kate dropped another letter into place. "I'm going—with Wiley."

So that was what Huffler meant. Kate already had promised to go with him. That was why Huffler had spoken. He wanted Jim to understand the decision was Kate's. "Was that your idea or Frank's?"

"What do you mean?"

"Stop it, Kate." Jim pulled her around to face him. The type scattered from her hand, spilled to the floor. "This isn't any game we're playing." He gripped her arm. "I love you."

She twisted free. Breathing hard, she tossed back her hair. "Strong, aren't you? You can bully any woman half your size. But when it comes to Burleigh, that's something else."

Jim felt helpless against her unreasoning anger. "Frank put you up to this. He told you I'd be jealous enough to grab a gun and go after Burleigh—that you could drive me into it."

"I no longer have any interest in what you do!"

"You love me, Kate. Don't pretend this way."

"Love?" Her laugh sounded like she wanted to cry. "How wrong can a girl be?"

Jim went alone to the dance. He wouldn't give Kate and Frank the satisfaction of knowing they had kept him away and he didn't aim to encourage Huffler by his absence. But it wasn't easy. Everybody saw him come in and everybody knew.

He discovered Kate at once, dancing with Huffler to the coaxing fiddles and the thump-tinkle of the frontless old piano. Her ruffled white dress swirled like a personal cloud and her red hair seemed to catch sparks from the oil lamps that hung from the cross-beamed rafters.

Kate was smiling, but it was a vacant, put-on smile. Turning, she saw Jim and lost the smile an instant as her eyes held upon him. Abruptly, her glance flicked past him and her mouth widened with forced laughter at something Huffler had said.

JIM MOVED to the refreshment table, set upon wooden horses in the space reserved for the jury when court was in session. The ladies had done their fanciest with cakes and pies and danties. At the far end of the table, there were cups and glasses

for the men who had brought along stronger refreshment. Frank was among the group drinking there.

As he hesitated, Jim saw Frank pull a bottle from his pocket. He was close enough to get a flash of the label. Dublin Irish Whiskey. A cold wind swept through Jim's mind. The bottle was like the one in his desk drawer.

Jim didn't like what he was thinking. Frank wasn't the only man in Bannock who drank that brand. Burleigh probably sold it across the bar and there must be other places that stocked it. If Frank could buy it here in town, so could other men.

The girl behind the refreshment table was smiling at Jim patiently in the belief he was trying to make up his mind about buying a piece of cake. The money from cake sales went to pay for the music and use of the hall. Jim took a silver dollar from his pocket and dropped it on the table. "They all look good," he said. "I can't decide."

"I made the chocolate cake." She pushed the plate forward. She was blonde, buxom, rather pretty. One of the Hersh girls. Emilie or Camille, something like that. Her look was definitely inviting.

He grinned a bit. "I'm sure it must be tasty, if you made it." He didn't feel in the mood for this sort of thing. But then, why not? If Kate could have a fling with Huffler, why shouldn't he enjoy himself? "How about dancing with me while I make up my mind?"

"Well, I really should watch the table." She laughed, wanting to be coaxed.

Jim coaxed her. He didn't have to try too hard. She found another girl to sell cake. He took her in his arms and danced with her and it wasn't bad. Not like having Kate in his arms, but she was good to look at and she seemed as willing as he was to have a little fun.

It turned out he was right about her name being Emilie. She knew his name and was calling him "Jim" before they had danced twice around the floor. "I heard about you and Kate O'Shea," she said. "All the girls are talking about you."

"Didn't know I was that popular."

Emilie laughed again. "You'd be surprised." She squeezed his hand. "Maybe I shouldn't right out and admit it, but I'm glad you're celebrating your freedom by dancing with me. Do you think I'm bold, Jim—saying things like that?"

"No." He swallowed hard. "Not at all." Jim looked over her shoulder to see how Kate was taking it. He hadn't wanted to look right away, that would have been too obvious. He half-expected Kate would pretend to ignore him. Jim wasn't prepared for the direct, blazing stare that met his glance. Kate was furious and she made no attempt to hide her withering anger. Jim grinned at her and tightened his arm around Emilie.

But he didn't feel happy about it; there was no satisfaction in Kate's openly-displayed jealousy. That look told him, despite everything she had said or anything she might do, Kate loved him. And Jim knew she was hurt as he had been hurt.

He kept his mind on the squeaking tune of the fiddles, kept his eyes from looking for Kate. It was like riding a blind trail and hoping it would come out someplace he knew, where he could find his way home. The music stopped finally and the stomping, laughing crowd broke off into couples who drifted toward the door and the night. Jim wanted to take her back to the table, but Emilie had his arm. "Would you like some punch?" he tried.

"I'm not thirsty, Jim. But it is warm in here. Everybody's going out for a little air."

Yes, everybody. Kate going out with Huffler, laughing for him, her head lifted and her hand on his arm. Jim

thought: what fools we're making of curselves. And for what? Oh, Kate!

HE STROLLED with Emilie, out the door and away from the light, away from Kate and Huffler. Emilie stopped walking. "Aren't there a lot of stars tonight? Did you ever see so many, Jim?" Her fingers traced the crease of his shirt down to his wrist, lightly pausing there before she tentatively offered him her hand to hold. Warm fingers, alive in his, waiting as though they had asked a question, or perhaps had already given him an answer.

Jim closed his eyes. But with them shut, everything he had tried to keep from his mind came clear in it. He could see Kate and Huffler together like this.

He took Emilie in his arms. Almost roughly, he kissed her, as if he were fighting what was in his mind with that kiss. He felt Emilie come to him, willingly hold herself close.

But suddenly, she stiffened in his arms. Emilie moved back, facing him. "Why did you do that?"

"You didn't want me to?"

Her face was hard in the moonlight, her mouth drawn. She didn't look pretty now. "You weren't thinking about me. You were kissing her." For a moment, she looked as if she would strike him. Gradually, the anger seemed to go out of her. Emilie's shoulders lifted and then slumped. "You still love Kate that much?"

Jim nodded. "I'm sorry, Emilie. There was no excuse for losing my head."

As though all the emotion had been taken from the words, she said, "I feel sorry for you." Emilie turned and he watched her go up the path.

Jim looked away. His back to the courthouse, he studied the wagons and the arcaded street beyond them, without really seeing anything in that semi-darkness. Behind him, the music started again, its gay melody unreal and distant as he stood alone among shadows made vivid by his longing.

Abruptly, his head jerked up and he strained forward, listening. He heard the sound again. His whole body alerted to that sharp whine, the echoing thwack. Jim's legs were in motion before the sound died.

Others had heard the shots. The courthouse emptied as Jim ran to the street. The crowd came up fast. The gun roared once more, down in front of the *Queen High,* spewing its yellow red into the darkness and blinking out.

Slowing, Jim reached for his own gun, catching the hammer under his thumb, his finger sliding into the trigger guard. The crowd knew enough to scatter. Cautiously, he took to the side of the buildings, inching his way, his eyes searching for any movement, trying to figure the set-up.

There was a groan from the center of the street. A figure rose from the shadows. The man stood a moment, swaying on his feet, his form clearly outlined in the patch of moonlight that boxed between the buildings. Lurching forward, he fell.

Jim went to him, crouched beside him. In the half-light, he recognized the wounded man as Ron Unwhal. Lifting his shoulders, Jim shouted, "Somebody, get a lantern!"

Some of the men who had taken cover behind Jim came forward now. There would be no more shooting. Whoever had fired at Unwhal had sense enough not to show himself before the crowd. Unwhal ran the Roelick Feed Supply house and he had plenty of friends. Jim put up his gun and carried Unwhal to the walk.

He was out cold. His labored breathing was strong with the smell of liquor. Somebody brought a lantern. Men came out of the *Queen High,* carrying lamps. In the circle of light, Jim examined Unwhal. He had been shot in the left thigh. The bleeding

had already stopped and the wound didn't look serious. There were tattoo marks of powder residue, which meant the shot had been fired at close range.

JIM GOT up. "Better get Doc Kantor." He turned to the silent crowd. "Anybody know what this was about?" There was no answer. Jim saw Kate and Huffler, Frank beside them. He looked to see who might be missing. Burleigh, for one. Queer that Burleigh wouldn't come out to see who was shot in front of his own place. "Unwhal may be able to tell us what happened when Doc brings him around, but he was drinking and I doubt if he'll know."

"Why not ask Burleigh?" Frank asked. "This looks like one of his dirty jobs. Where's the grinnin' devil hidin' himself?" There was a murmur of approval, a quick-fire of whispering. "Sure and he's not deaf—why isn't Burleigh here?"

"Let's all take it easy until we know what we're doing," Jim warned. Frank undestood the effect his question would have. He was deliberately trying to stir up the men while the excitement of shooting still gripped them. All this needed was a spark to blow the crowd into action against Burleigh. They weren't in the mood to wait until Unwhal could talk. "I'll ask the questions, Frank." Jim looked at him. His glance went to Kate and he saw her eyes narrow at the way he spoke to her father.

"Frank's right." Pete Lowker, a stubby Welshman who worked as handyman and porter at the bank, pushed his way through. "I saw Mr. Unwhal in the *Queen High*. I just remembered. Playing heavy at faro and winning heavy, too."

"There were a lot of folks in Burleigh's tonight," Jim said carefully.

"But none winning as much as Mr. Unwhal." Lowker turned to the others for support, enjoying the sudden importance his statement had given him. He drew himself up to his full five-feet-two. His wiry black eyebrows bristled with new-found authority as he waggled his finger at Jim. "Look in his pockets. See for yourself if Burleigh's men followed him out of the *Queen High* and robbed him."

The crowd backed Lowker's demand, mumbling loudly. Jim turned to the unconscious man, searched Unwhal's pockets. They were empty. "Looks like he was robbed, right enough." His head lifted. "All right. It's time to ask Burleigh some questions."

Frank laughed scornfully. "Questions, you're after askin' him! Why not invite Burleigh to tea?"

"I'm carrying out the law." Jim struggled to hold his temper. "The fact Unwhal was robbed is no proof against Burleigh. But I aim to find out." He swung to Lowker. "I'm making you a deputy." Jim wanted them to know he was being fair. He pointed. "And you, Huffler. The rest of you stay here."

"I'm willin'." Huffler stepped forward. "We elected Laramie sheriff and we've got to give him a chance to do it his way. If that doesn't work —we've still got enough rope."

Jim stared at him. Huffler spoke as though he wanted to make it clear to Jim and the whole town that whatever their personal differences, he intended to play it square. Over his shoulder, Jim saw Kate's surprise and Frank's scowl and he realized what it had cost Huffler to speak that way. "Thanks," Jim told him.

The three of them crossed to the steps of the *Queen High*, Jim in the lead. He shoved open the batwing door. The long room, with its green-covered tables and ornate mahogany bar, was thick with smoke, but almost empty of men.

Jim strode to the bar, Huffler and Lowker behind him. In back of it, Ivor Lang put down the glass he had been wiping. Lang's expression was one of

questioning innocence, as though they might be patrons who just happened in for a drink.

"Where's Burleigh?"

Lang raised his shoulders in a noncommittal shrug.

JIM REACHED across the bar, grabbed his shirt and pulled him close. "You'd better talk—and fast or you'll have that mob in here to rip the place apart."

"Honest, sheriff, I ain't—" Jim's look stopped the lie. Lang wet his lips with his tongue. "Mr. Burleigh's upstairs in the private dining room." He jerked his head toward the ceiling. "He gave orders he wasn't to be bothered—not for anything."

"He'll be bothered for this." Dropping Lang, Jim swung to Huffler. "Come on." They climbed the stairs, turned the rose-carpeted corridor. The scratchy hurdy-gurdy of a gramophone sang through the closed door at the end of the hall, playing with a din that made the full banging of Jim's fist against the wood sound like light tapping.

The door swung open violently. "Thought I gave orders to keep—" Burleigh's roar died unfinished as he recognized Jim. "What is this?" His tone became quieter, but still belligerent. His stare jumped from Jim to Huffler and Lowker.

"We want to talk to you, Burleigh."

He glanced back into the room. Jim followed his glance. The elegantly-set table gleamed with silver and crisply starched white linen. The remains of a dinner lay in serving dishes.

Beyond the candles that were the only light in the room, a dark-haired girl sat with her shoulders hunched and her head turned away. Jim thought for a moment he was seeing things in that dim light. Except for her hair, the girl had Emilie's features; she might have been Emilie, wearing a wig. But he had left Emilie at the dance.

Jim identified her then as Emilie's sister, Irene Hersh. Stepping into the hall, Burleigh reached behind him and shut the door. Jim asked, "You've been here all evening?"

"I'd like to know what business that is of yours?"

Huffler answered Burleigh. "Ron Unwhal was shot out front. He had been gan blin' downstairs and he took a lot of your money with him. It was gone when they found him."

"And you think I did it?" Burleigh turned to Jim, his mouth twisted. "That's the fair play I get, is it? Any saddle bum might have followed Unwhal out of here and pulled a gun on him. But you want an excuse to frame me and this is it."

"I'm asking questions, Burleigh. There's a crowd outside that wants some straight answers."

Burleigh shifted to Huffler. "You've left here with winnings yourself more than once. Why didn't my men jump you? Why would I tell them to get Unwhal?"

"That's no answer," Huffler said. His eyes burned at Burleigh momentarily. "I've lost ten times as much as I've ever won from the *Queen High* and you know it."

Burleigh stared him back. He gripped the knob, opened the door. "Irene, come out here."

She crossed the room slowly, her eyes down, not looking at any of them. Her face blushed as red as the plaid of Burleigh's vest. Jim saw how she was trembling. Irene's mouth was painted and she looked flashy in her low-cut heliotrope gown, but beneath that surface hardness there was an appealing loveliness that somehow made her seem very young. Jim thought of Emilie. The Hersh sisters were alike, butterflies chasing a bright flame of excitement. He felt sorry for them.

Protectively, Burleigh put his arm around Irene. It was an unexpectedly tender gesture, coming from him. His booming voice had gentled. "Tell them what time we started dinner, Irene."

"It was about six, I think." Her whispered answer was childlike with

puzzled timidity. Her head lifted a second and her eyes asked Burleigh questions she was afraid to voice.

"And I've been with you all the time since then? I didn't leave the room?"

Irene lowered her eyes and nodded.

"What about your men, Burleigh?" Jim studied him. "They could carry out your orders without you being there. I'm not satisfied. You, Huffler?"

Lowker broke in. "Why wouldn't she lie for him? A woman like her?" He sounded as though he felt slighted because Jim had asked Huffler's opinion, but not his. Lowker jabbed his finger at Irene. "Will you tell the same lie in court, so everybody can hear it—that you were in that room alone with Burleigh all the time?"

"Court?" She shrank back against Burleigh. "Oh, no...please."

BURLEIGH sprang at Lowker. His big arms lifted Lowker from the floor like a matchstick he might snap in two. Burleigh slammed him against the wall, drove his fist into him.

"Hold it, Burleigh." Jim had his gun.

"I'll kill him!" Burleigh hunched forward. "Talking that way about Irene! The dirty—"

"That's enough." Jim waved him away with the gun. Lowker cowered against the wall, all the bullying knocked out of him. "You asked for that, Lowker," Jim said. "There'll be no dragging her into this—here or anyplace else."

Lowker pulled himself up. "I still say it," he squeaked. "She's lying for him."

"Shut up!" Huffler grabbed the little man. "You've said enough, Lowker." Jim caught an odd look between them, as though Huffler were giving a command that went beyond this hotheaded scuffle, the way he might warn a servant to remember his place. As cashier, Huffler was his boss at the bank.

Burleigh was quiet, almost too quiet after that outburst. "I'm taking you to jail," Jim told him. "You'll be safer there until everybody cools off."

"You've got nothing against me."

"Then you have no reason to be afraid to go."

"No reason?" Burleigh eyed the gun. "Locked up like a criminal?"

"You're being arrested for disturbing the peace."

"That's the kind of law you hand out, is it, Laramie?"

"Rather have the law the mob out there wants to give you?" Jim asked.

Irene hugged Burleigh's arm. "No! You can't take him. He hasn't done anything!"

"I'm trying to keep him alive," Jim told her. He raised his gun. "Let's go, Burleigh. And you'd better give the sign to your men not to pull anything as we head through downstairs. There are ten outside to every one of them. If you've got the brains I think you have, you'll know I'm trying to give you a chance."

"We'll go ahead and keep folks clear," Huffler said. "You come with me, Lowker."

Burleigh's expression changed when he saw the crowd and heard the heated whispering that greeted his appearance in the doorway. He moved closer to Jim and walked fast, not looking to either side. "Frank O'Shea's behind this," Burleigh said. "He and a few others who have lost money in my place."

"That's not why Frank wants to get rid of you."

"I should have expected you'd play with him, the way you are about

O'Shea's daughter—but somehow, I figured you'd be straight, Laramie. Law and order. You made it sound like the goods."

"How would you play this, Burleigh?"

"The way I should have—with enough guns to quiet the poor loosers and keep them quiet."

Jim shook his head. "One man isn't big enough to own Bannock. Guns were the law back when you opened the *Queen High*. But then the town got bigger. Times changed and maybe you tried to change, too. Only trouble is, a lot of people remember how you used to be and you still stand for those things to them. You still act the part, Burleigh, the old boss. And they don't want you."

"All your prisoners get sermons?"

"Not all of them." Jim grinned. He had no use for Burleigh as the owner of the *Queen High*. But, in an oblique way, he was beginning to like him as a man, despite his faults. Burleigh was a hold-over from what Bannock had once been, the cowtown and railroad helltown that had shucked its rough old clothes for the new duds of respectability.

Huffler and Lowker and some of the crowd trailed along. Jim herded Burleigh through the door and struck a match for the oil lamp. Carrying the lamp, he nodded to the corridor. "Down there, Burleigh." He locked him in the cell.

Jim went back out front. "Thanks, Huffler. And you, Lowker." He faced the others. "You might as well break it up. Burleigh's locked in. There's nothing more to watch." He searched for Kate in the crowd. She and Frank were missing. He shut the door and dropped the keys on his desk. "Burleigh," he called, "anything you need?"

"Nothing you'd give me."

Jim grinned again and sat in the desk chair, swinging up his boots and tilting his hat to shade out the light so he could doze a bit.

3

HE WAS half-asleep when the door creaked. Kate? Jim pulled his feet to the floor. His hand touched his gunbelt, just in case.

"Hello," Emilie said, coming in. "I guess you didn't expect to see me." She had a paper-wrapped bundle under her arm. Emilie smiled sweetly. "I wanted to tell you, I'm not angry, Jim—about tonight."

"I'm glad." He tried to match her smile, but something about her manner bothered him. Why should she come here this late to tell him that? "What's the package?"

"Something I want to show you." She looked for a place to put the bundle, rested it on top of the keys on his desk. Emilie pulled the knot, keeping her eyes down in a way that made Jim think again how much she resembled her sister, Irene. All at once, her smile vanished. Her hand darted beneath the wrapping. "This," she said.

The light glinted on the gun in her hand. Her eyes and mouth were hard. "I know how to use it and I will, if I have to." She shoved the barrel against his chest, held it. "Pick up the keys."

"Don't be crazy, Emilie."

"Shut up and do what I tell you." She jerked the gun. He could feel its trembling in her fingers. The slightest jump of her nerves might blast him.

Jim took the keys, watching for a chance to slap the gun from her hand. Emilie prodded him toward the corridor. Burleigh stood behind the bars, silent, looking as amazed as Jim had been.

"Irene's waiting for you in a wagon, Burleigh," Emilie said. "She and Lang and all the money they could take from the *Queen High*. You can get out of town together and go some-

place; both of you won't be pushed around. Irene loves you. I want my sister to have that chance." Emilie pleaded, "There's nothing for you here but hate. They didn't kill you tonight, but they will. You've got to get out before they do." There was a burning in her eyes as she turned to Jim. "Unlock it and let him out."

Jim twisted the key. "You'll never make it, Burleigh. If you try this, there's no law can save you from that mob."

"He'll make it." Emilie elbowed the iron door open, keeping the gun on Jim. "There's a bundle on the desk," she told Burleigh. "One of my dresses and a hat you can put on." Her mouth framed a grim smile. "If anybody saw Emilie Hersh come in to visit the sheriff, they'll think it's me going out. Even if they see you in the wagon with Irene, they won't guess."

Burleigh nodded, taking off his jacket as he hurried to the front room. He came back in a minute, rolling his trousers so the cuffs wouldn't show beneath the dress. Emilie gave Burleigh the gun. "I'll hook you up." She struggled with the snaps, managed to fasten two of them. Burleigh kept the gun pointed at Jim's belt while Emilie tried to fasten the hat with the long hatpin.

Jim dove for the gun with a sudden lunge as Emilie stepped back. The weapon spun from Burleigh's hand. Jim threw himself on it, rolled to his side, lifting the gun as he got to his feet. "All right," he said. "The masquerade is over. Get back, Burleigh." He swung so he could cover Emilie, too.

A blinding stab shot pain up his right arm. Convulsively, Jim's hand opened wide. The gun fell and Emilie scrambled after it as Burleigh's fist smashed against Jim's head and staggered him. His right arm was numb, but Jim wildly struck out with his left.

Emilie stopped Jim with the gun. He dropped back against the wall. Teeth clenched, he pulled the hatpin she had driven deep in his arm.

Burleigh fixed the woman's hat low over his forehead. He looked at Jim. "This will make a fool of you," he said. "Maybe it sounds funny, coming from me—but I'm sorry for that." He put his hand on Emilie's shoulder. "I'll take care of Irene."

"I know you will. We planned it so she could keep in touch with me."

He was gone then. The door shut. The small building was quiet. Emilie kept the weapon hard against Jim. "You would have killed me?" he asked.

"Yes." She moved the barrel slightly. "And that still goes."

HE SHOOK his head. "Those tricks. The smile and the bundle and the hatpin. I could have beaten a man."

"It was more than that," Emilie said. "You put up a fight because it was your duty as sheriff, but the fight wasn't in your heart. You're not soft, Jim. You're about as brave as they come. But you have got a heart. And you know Irene and Burleigh are as much in love as—you and Kate."

"That won't stop me from getting Burleigh and bringing him back."

"You'll never get him now."

Jim listened. Somebody was outside. He heard the steps come closer along the walk. His heart stilled as he recognized the rhythm of those light, hurrying steps. Kate!

The door creaked open. "Jim?" Kate called. She halted as she saw him with Emilie, her eyes big with surprise. "I thought you were alone. I just saw Emilie leave." Her words spilled in a confused rush of thinking aloud. Kate's glance jumped past them down the corridor to the open cell. "Burleigh! He's gone!"

Jim felt Emilie's hand jerk as Kate turned to run. He threw himself, shielding Kate from the blast of Emilie's gun.

The explosion hurled him back. His arm flapped in a crazy, jointless arc

as he fell. Jim's head crashed against the floor. The red flame in his eyes whirled like the cone of a tornado, filling the corridor, blanking it with a dizzying fire that swept over him and engulfed him.

Dimly, he became aware of a babble of voices. He felt himself being lifted, carried. He tried to speak, but the words wouldn't go through that awful, throbbing haze.

After a long time, he saw Kate's face. It was blurred and it swayed back and forth. Gradually, the features sharpened. He felt her hand upon his head. He fought to open his eyes.

"Jim." She bent close. "Don't try to talk, darling. You were badly wounded. You've been unconscious, but you'll be all right. Doc Kantor just left with the others. We carried you over here to my place."

"Burleigh?"

"He got away, but they're after him. He killed Lowker. Emilie is locked up. Oh, Jim—you saved me. If it hadn't been for—"

"Lowker?" Jim forced himself up, fought the dizziness that struck him. His left shoulder was tightly bandaged. "Kate—what did you say—about Lowker?"

"Burleigh made good his threat. He shot Lowker after he broke jail. I didn't hear all of it, but Wiley found Lowker's body at the bank. Lowker slept there tonight. He had a bunk in the back room where he stayed sometimes when he had to be at work early."

"Burleigh wouldn't be insane enough to take time for that. He wanted to get away with Irene. He had no gun. How would he know Lowker slept at the bank?" Jim struggled to his feet.

"Please..." Kate tried to calm him. "Nobody expects you to do anything more. You gave Burleigh every chance. The law wasn't made to protect killers."

"I've got to stop it! Kate, Burleigh didn't kill Lowker. Don't you understand? Huffler—your father—they're leading a mob out there to string up an innocent man!"

"Jim!"

Holding himself against the wall, he edged his way from Kate's parlor to the print shop door. She put her arm around him. "Don't be foolish. Jim, come back."

"Kate, help me..." Jim leaned upon her. "We'll get Emilie. She knows which way Irene was going. They planned it together."

"Emilie helped Burleigh escape. She shot you. You can't let her out!"

He shut his eyes. "If you love me, Kate—if you ever loved me, don't argue now. I know what I have to do. Can't you trust me?"

She was quiet a moment. Softly, she said, "You're wrong, but I can't let you try alone." Kate helped him cross the street, up the steps. She opened the door. Together, they went to his desk.

Jim pulled the drawer, searched it. "Keys?"

"Wiley must have them. I heard him tell dad he locked Emilie in."

He drew his breath. "Emilie?" he called. He nodded to Kate to help him along the corridor. His legs were getting weaker and the pain was throbbing in his eyes. "Emilie?"

"Jim?" Emilie got up from the bunk in the corner of the cell. Her face twisted as she looked at his bandaged shoulder. "I'm sorry I did that."

"LISTEN to me, Emilie—you wanted to give Irene and Burleigh a chance. But they haven't any chance now unless I can get to them first and stop that hot rope mob. You know which way your sister was going. Kate and I can get a wagon. You've got to tell me."

Slowly, Emilie shook her head. "Maybe you think you can bring Burleigh back alive—but I don't, not after the way Huffler talked. He wants to kill and so do Frank O'Shea and the rest. One man isn't enough to stop them." She looked down. "Burleigh and my sister are headed for a

place the mob may not look for them to be. Their only hope is to hide there until the trail is cold."

"Emilie's right," Kate said. "You couldn't bring him back, even if you got to him." She half-dragged Jim into the front room, dropped him into the chair. "When you can stand on your feet, you're going over to the shop with me and you're going to stay there."

Jim put his hands to his face, leaning forward so the rush of blood would clear his head. "You said Huffler led the men?"

"Wiley was your deputy." Kate frowned. "He and dad organized the posse."

Jim sank back in the chair. "Yes—Frank, too."

"Wiley said nobody could blame you. He was as much for law as anybody, but there was only one way to handle this. You know that's true, Jim. Whatever you feel about Burleigh, he did break jail and he did murder Lowker while he slept." She sighed. "If you feel better, we'll try to get across the street."

"No," Jim said. "No, Kate. I'm staying here. If Emilie's right about that hideout, there's a chance the posse won't find Burleigh tonight. They should be back soon, calling off the chase until it's light." He glanced at the clock. "If they come back without killing Burleigh, I've got a plan that might work." He grinned a bit. "It's half a guess and—half a prayer. But maybe that's all Burleigh needs to live."

"There'll be more trouble."

"Some." Jim squeezed her hand. "You'd better not be here. It won't be nice for you—no matter how it turns out."

"I'm staying with you," she said.

The wall clock ticked slowly, dragging its minutes. The sky was already graying with dawn. If they had Burleigh's trail, they would press on after him. All Jim had to count upon was Emilie's hope that the hideout was good. That hope and his own.

Jim heard them, finally. A slow-paced movement of weary horses and tired men. It was a good sound. Men who had been keyed high by the excitement of a rope over the limb of a tree wouldn't ride back to town like this.

He took his gun from its holster, thumbed cartridges from his belt. Silent, Kate watched him, her eyes pleading with him not to take chances. "You'd better get back with Emilie," he said. "From here out, I don't know what will happen."

Jim stood alone in the doorway as the men rode up. Huffler swung down from his saddle and came over to Jim, followed by Frank and the others. "You all right, Laramie? Didn't expect to see you on your feet this quick."

IT COULD be Frank. Jim had to make his choice. He flipped that coin in his mind and said his prayer. Scratching his fingers behind his ear, Jim looked straight at Huffler. "Sorry you had your ride for nothing. No way I could let you know." Jim kept the words easy, watching Frank and Huffler. "Burleigh's back." He told the lie straight, let it sink in. "I've got him locked up and he's staying there until he goes to trial. Burleigh claims he didn't shoot Lowker and I figure he's telling it right. Wouldn't have come back if he had."

"We don't care what Burleigh claims." Huffler shoved forward. "We know what he did and we've got our kind of trial for him. Better get out of the way, Laramie. We're comin' in to get him."

Jim's hand slid across his belt. "You're mighty anxious to kill. Where's all your fine talk about giving Burleigh a chance, Huffler?" He eased his gun.

"We've had enough talk."

"And enough killing," Jim shot back. "What are you afraid of, Huffler? Why do you want Burleigh dead?"

"You better explain that." Huffler pulled his own gun.

"I'm just asking."

"And we're comin' in." Huffler swung to Frank. "Laramie's makin' a show. He knows he can't hold us off, so he's tryin' to trick us. Burleigh's in there! Have you lost your guts?"

The crowd surged, mumbling angrily, pushing forward. Jim didn't move. "Huffler, you're under arrest! You murdered Pete Lowker!" Jim had to make it stick while the shock held the mob in balance. 'You want Burleigh dead so you can pin Lowker's killing on him—without anybody asking questions."

"You're a damned liar!"

"NO, HUFFLER. That much I know. Maybe I can only guess at the rest, but I can make a good guess. You lost a lot of money at the *Queen High* and you don't earn enough pay to gamble that hard—which means you stole from the bank. You wanted me to run Burleigh out of town. You even picked a bottle of whiskey out of the street and jammed it down my throat to make me sore at him, figuring I'd blame Burleigh. Maybe you thought his games were crooked and he was responsible for the mess you got yourself in at the bank, or maybe you figured somebody would suspect you were a thief and start asking Burleigh about how much you lost to him."

Jim saw what was in Huffler's face. He didn't have to do much guessing now. "I didn't run Burleigh out. But then, you got a better idea. Have your man, Lowker, spot a heavy winner at the *Queen High* and rob him in a way that would inflame the town against Burleigh. Unwhal happened to be your game. Lowker shot him and robbed him and put the finger on Burleigh. That was a two-way job. Get the town hot against Burleigh and split with Lowker to grab enough money so you could cover up at the bank."

He watched Huffler's hand on the gun. His fingers were white. "But that went sour, too. The mob didn't riot, Huffler, so you showed yellow and threw in with me to cover yourself in case Lowker talked too much. You figured Lowker wrong. He was a little man and that business of putting Burleigh on the spot made him a town hero for awhile and it went to his head. Lowker had all the money he stole from Unwhal and he had you where he wanted you. No way you could pin the rap on him or squeeze the money out of him. And all the time, those books that needed covering."

"You're guessin' a lot, but you can't prove anythin'. You're lyin', Laramie, to keep us from ropin' Burleigh—because Burleigh bought you out. Think I'd stand here and take it, if what you're sayin' was true?"

"Nothing else you can do. Shoot at me and you sign your own confession. This crowd is hunting the man who killed Lowker. They've got the rope waiting. And you know that, Huffler." Jim looked at Frank. He was staring at Huffler. So were the others around him. "Sure, I guessed part of it, Huffler. But the bank books will tell whether it's a good guess. You haven't had time to fix them yet. And folks will start to remember little things you've said and done. That adds up—the little things."

Huffler laughed. "Let's hear the rest of it. When you're through stallin', we'll get Burleigh, the way we planned."

"I'll tell you the rest," Kate broke in from in back of Jim. She stepped beside him in the doorway. Her hand slid beneath his arm. "I was the one who discovered Burleigh had broken jail. I ran across the street to the shop. Wiley was there with dad. And I told them." She went down the steps, stood in front of Huffler. "There was so much excitement, I didn't remember unti' now, Wiley. One of those—little things. You said you were going to round up some men. But you went in the direction of the bank. Because Burleigh's escape was a perfect set-up for you. You knew Lowker was asleep there and you knew Burleigh had threatened to kill

you because of the way he talked about Irene. There was no other reason for you to go to the bank—except to rob the Lowker of the money he held out on you. And to murder him!"

Jim saw Huffler's hand move. "Kate!"

But Frank had been watching Huffler, too. Frank hurled himself as Huffler's gun blasted at Kate. Huffler whirled, fired wildly into the crowd. He ran to the side of the building, crouched there. The mob held a second, broke with a roar.

Jim leveled his gun against the wall, squeezed the trigger. With a cry of pain, Huffler threw up his hand. The weapon went flying out of it.

They dragged Huffler. He kicked and screamed as they pulled him across the dirt by his heels. The crowd had the coil of rope from Huffler's own saddle.

Kate raced out in front of them. She tore the rope from them, raised it like a lash, her red hair flying wild as she faced the men who held Huffler. "There's been enough of shooting and killing and acting like animals!" Her defiant words flayed them. "There are laws in Bannock! Wiley must face the trial he would have refused Burleigh. Haven't we been wrong enough?"

They stopped and they listened and there were enough of them who believed her.

Frank took Huffler's arm, twisted it behind him and marched him up the steps to Jim. And Frank's eyes were filled with a sparkle of Irish righteousness. "I'm deliverin' a prisoner, me boy. Put him in the cooler before he spoils."

The laughter sounded like a cheer. "Since you've got the men you want," Jim told the crowd, "I've got a confession of my own to make. Burleigh's not in jail. I don't know where he is. He never came back and I'm not going after him. Bannock is rid of him and I guess maybe Burleigh figures he's well rid of us."

THERE WAS some grumbling and a lot of talk. But they drifted away slowly, a few of them arguing but nobody aiming to do much about it. They were tired and they had been riding most of the night after a man they didn't want. Homes and wives and families were waiting for them. Jim guessed most of them would figure it like that. They would figure thy had a city now and a law that would deal with Huffler.

Huffler had nothing to say. He threw himself on the cell bunk with his hands to his cheeks, as though he didn't want his face looked at. Jim let Emilie out. "I guess you'll be wanting to get to Burleigh and your sister," he said. "It's not easy for them thinking they're hunted." He grinned. "Where are they, Emilie?"

"Up in the woods on your ranch." She smiled. "Irene figured the sheriff's place would be the last spot anybody would search."

Jim laughed. "You'll be all right?" His expression sobered. "I mean—you have money enough, everything you need?"

Emilie nodded. "I won't be coming back. We'll be happier someplace else where we can start again. I know what I want now, Jim. It may be hard to find, but I'm going to try."

"What's that?"

Her eyes teased as they looked directly into his, but her voice caught a little. "A man like you for a husband." Impulsively, Emilie reached up and kissed him.

"Hey!" Kate called, coming into the corridor. "What goes on?"

"Just goodbye." Emilie moved away and winked at her. "I hope you don't mind. The rest are all yours."

"They'd better be." Laughing, Kate came to him. Her laughter stilled as he took her in his arms. "Oh, Jim."

"Kate," he said. "Kate O'Shea Laramie. It goes pretty good like that."

"It goes perfect," she agreed.

★

THE HOUSEKEEPER KIND

by Una Bunker

Dora was too shy to attract the attention of Bart, who guarded the gold brought down from the mines, and didn't hesitate to kill . . .

FROM HER window in Ma Ritter's boarding house. Dora Willet watched Maud Dasey and Bart Warden coming along the street beneath Oldtown's giant Lombardy poplars. Maud looked lusciously rounded and feminine in her snug city made suit of claret colored wool; and her magnificent black eyes slanted up at big wind-browned Bart in Maud's telling way.

She always managed, Dora seethed rebelliously, to get through work early at Oldtown Emporium the days that Bart came in on the stage from the mines. By the time he delivered the strong box heavy with gold to the express office and put away his sawed-off shotgun, Maud was always there on the sidewalk outside, ready to walk home to Ma Ritter's with him.

They reached Ma's picket gate, and

Bart opened it for Maud, glancing casually toward the windows above. Dora shrank back out of sight, a flush mounting to the curly hair dipped like a swirl of cornsilk over her shy brown eyes.

"You're too shy, Dorey," Ma Ritter often scolded. "Don't let a smart piece with a flip tongue in her head shoo out all your gumption. Maud could be real jealous of that cute pint-sized figure of yours. Even if you haven't the clothes she has to frill it up."

Dora glanced down at her serviceable blue serge dress covered by a big pink apron. She sighed as she listened to Maud and Bart coming in at the front door downstairs, Maud's bright chatter. She wished she had had more gumption, as Ma Ritter called it, before Maud landed in town. It was painful yet, remembering how idiotic she had acted the time Bart had taken her to the concert at Oldtown hall... as though she really didn't care to go out with him. When, if he only knew it, his big rangy form and sunny smile had held her thoughts and heart since high school days.

Maud's vigorous footsteps climbed the squeaky walnut staircase and crossed the narrow upper hall to her room opposite Dora's, and Bart entered his room below. Dora heard a chair creak as he sat down, and the thump of his high laced boots landing upon the floor.

The odor of roast beef and apple pie seeped up the stairwell from the kitchen where Ma Ritter was preparing one of her bountiful meals for Maud and Bart. Dora wished she could eat down in the dining room. Then she'd have the chance that Maud had to see Bart. But she couldn't afford to, because sewing gleaned her such a meager living. Especially since Maud had come to work at Oldtown Emporium, persuading people to buy their smart city made clothes like her own.

Dora's potato bubbled on the small oil stove that her kind-hearted landlady had put in so she could cook her own meals. Dora lingered at the window, looking out at the smoke of supper fires wisping over Oldtown's ragged gardens.

A footstep clinked on the walk below, and she glanced down.

Hank Lendel, the town character, lumbered by outside the picket fence, looking like a frowsy bear in his faded jeans. He caught sight of her at the window and tipped his hat politely. Hank was very polite to the ladies. He was a "bit touched in the head," Ma Ritter said.

He wavered for a moment at the gate. Years ago, in more prosperous times, he had lived at Ma Ritter's, Dora knew, and sometimes yet Ma gave him a meal. Hank wandered on into the fading light, toward his worked out claim down the canyon below town. He looked as lost and lonely, Dora thought, as she felt tonight.

She could hear Bart moving about downstairs, running water into the old marble topped basin in the corner, and she pictured him scrubbing his brown neck and cheeks, slicking back the wiry blond hair above his strong-boned face.

"He should have married some nice Oldtown girl long ago," Ma Ritter said with a glance that stained Dora's cheeks. "He would have, too, if his Ma hadn't hung onto him like a leech."

DORA HAD sewed for his mother in the pretty green-shuttered white cottage on the hill above town, and many tales of blood and bravery she had heard from the prideful old lady. Bart had nearly killed one bandit with his fists alone, guarding the gold he brought down as express messenger from the mines. And goodness knew how many others he had nicked with a bullet.

"Quit your fibbing, Ma," he had grinned one day when he came home and caught her at it. "You'll have Dora afraid to come back and finish your dresses."

He had wanted her to come, Dora felt, sweetness tingling through her.

And she had loved making dresses for his mother. But there were no more dresses now, for Mrs. Warden had died last winter; and Bart had closed his home and moved down to Ma Ritter's.

One night soon afterward he had asked her to go to the concert with him. She had had a breathless wonderful time, and when they came home Bart had taken her hand beneath the vine that hung over Ma Ritter's front porch. For a smothered instant she had thought he was going to kiss her. But he didn't. His deep voice had fuzzed up awkwardly and he said,

"I never knew till lately what it could mean, coming home to a single room. Like you've had all this time. Ma Ritter says I ought to see you get out more. And I agree with her."

So that was the reason he had invited her? Ma Ritter had asked him to! Dora drew her hand away, and the dryness in her throat rasped her voice a little as she said, "Ma Ritter needn't trouble herself about me. I can take care of myself. I always have."

She had bade him goodnight and run upstairs to her room, leaving him standing there with a blank look on his face.

Dora smarted yet at Ma's scolding afterward.

"You're just too touchy, Dorey. Scared he'll see you like him. Get some spunk and show him you do. Maud does. Take a lesson from her."

"I'm not Maud," Dora had retorted.

"Well, you better be! A great outdoor fellow like Bart can be shy as a deer inside. And he's too nice a boy to let slip away. Specially when you want him."

The hot blood had poured up over Dora's chin and cheeks, and her eyes sparked fire. Then they softened and began to twinkle. "Oh, you'll teach me yet, Ma Ritter!"

Bart hadn't asked her out again. Maud invited him to the Emporium's annual party, and they had gone out several times since.

DORA WENT across to the stove, drained her potato and put her lamb chop on to fry. Beneath its sizzle she heard Bart's door open, his footstep on the stairs. She straightened. He was coming up to see Maud about something?

But Bart paused at her door, rapped.

Dora's hands flew to smooth her hair and the pink apron that almost swallowed up her small form. Then she went across to open the door, her knees ridiculously weak.

Bart's six feet two filled the low hallway, massive and masculine; but the gray eyes that could sight so coolly along a gun barrel were crinkled in a wry smile very boyish and appealing.

"Help me, Dora?" He held out the wind-breaker jacket he wore to the mines. "Mother always said no one could beat you with a needle, but it's sure got me licked."

One sleeve was ripped, she saw, and down the front a button dangled, hopelessly tangled up in needle and thread. Bart's great hands struggling with a needle! A dimple flashed at the corner of Dora's mouth. "I'll fix it in no time."

Magically the awkward shyness left his face. He handed the coat to her, glancing interestedly into the room at her table set with plate, silverware, and an amber glass slipper filled with violets.

Dora flushed guiltily. She had taken the violets from his deserted garden on her way home from work, and he couldn't fail to recognize the exquisite rosy mauve of his mother's double blossoms.

"They were going to waste so," she apologized, "I had to take some."

"I'm glad you did. The place looks pretty run down, I guess, with the spring crop of weeds."

No it didn't...it looked lovely with its green shutters and white clapboards nestling behind the oleander hedge...it needed people living in it, needed to be a home again...

"The daffodils are coming up," Dora said.

"Take some any time, will you?"

She nodded, feeling the listening stillness behind Maud's half open doorway across the hall.

"There's no hurry about the coat," Bart said, and he went back downstairs. Leaving a drift of gladness around her.

A few minutes later Maud came across the landing, on her way down to the dining room.

"'Lo, Dode." She paused in the doorway.

She had taken off her hat and jacket, and her shoulders gleamed like pink satin beneath her peek-a-boo embroidery blouse. Her hair, a shining black, was fashioned over an invisible wire rat (so stylish in the city that spring, Maud said) and it framed her face in a high dramatic cloud.

She sniffed interestedly. "Do I smell tobacco smoke?"

"It's Bart's coat, I suppose." Dora motioned toward it hanging over the back of her rocking chair. "He asked me to mend it for him."

Maud nodded approvingly. "He told me what a fine seamstress you are, Dode." With faintly humorous compassion she regarded the stove, table and packing box cupboard curtained in checked gingham, the whole room's tidiness, crowded though it was with housekeeping equipment. "It's too bad you're not the marrying kind. You'd make some man the best housekeeper."

Seamstress ... housekeeper... Dora tried to smile as Maud went on downstairs. Maud was the marrying kind. Already she had been married and divorced, she had confided one night, but Dora mustn't tell! Broad-minded as people were getting, Maud said, you never could tell about a hick town like this.

DORA ATE her potato and chop, listening to Maud's gay chatter rippling up from the dining room, Bart's deep chuckles. She hurried through her fruit and cookie, then sat down beside her sewing basket with the coat. She stitched up the rent and clipped the loosened button from its tangled thread, setting it into place again. A mellow tobacco fragrance drifted up from its folds. She loved to see Bart's pipe clamped so comfortably in his strong white teeth. Dora bent suddenly and pressed her face into the rough tobacco scented cloth.

She'd take his coat back tonight, say something clever as Maud always did. She'd put some spunk into herself and make him forget how short and childish she had been.

She heard Maud coming back upstairs, and hastily laid aside the coat.

Maud sauntered into the room, looking well filled and satisfied. "The coat finished, Dode?"

Dora nodded, abruptly despising the nickname that Maud had coined for her.

Maud stepped over, gathered the jacket onto her arm with the casualness of ownership. "I'll take it down when I go."

Smart piece...gumption...Ma's chiding words prodded Dora. She took the coat politely but firmly from Maud. "I'll take it down myself, thank you."

Maud's brows arched. "Oh?" Then, "Yes, yes, of course, you want him to pay you. But we were going out to the Five Hundred Club so I thought I'd save you a trip downstairs."

The Five Hundred Club was composed of the town's young married couples and potential new members they invited. They had invited Maud and Bart to join?

"You'd better hurry," Maud advised as she stood, feeling like a wilted leaf, "Bart and I are leaving in a jiff." Amusement, leavened with sympathy, twitched Maud's lips. "Poor little mouse, she's in love with Bart," Maud's eyes were saying.

Dora turned down the steps to get away; but Maud lingered on the landing, peeping over the bannister as Bart opened his door. He had on his overcoat, ready to go out with Maud.

Dora handed him the coat, scarcely

waiting for his thanks. "It was nothing," she said briefly, and ran back to her room.

"I'm just a sewing machine to both of them," she shrugged bitterly.

LONELINESS and depression weighted her footsteps as she walked homeward a few evenings later. Ma Ritter's shabby frame house would be dark and deserted, she knew, for her landlady had gone to visit her daughter in a neighboring town while Maud was away in the city buying clothes for the Emporium. And Bart's stage always left on Wednesdays.

Dora went into Swen's Bakery and bought two fat cream-puffs. Usually she allowed herself the luxury of only one, but good food did so much for Maud, it might help her morale tonight. With the two knobby delicious looking pastries in a box, she turned up the street lined with poplars.

Through the dusk she saw Hank Lendel meandering toward her along the walk. Dora hurried to reach her gate, the security of the front porch. He was harmless, Ma Ritter said. Until he soaked himself in liquor. Then he would storm around town, hunting for anyone he took a notion had stolen a few grains of gold from his claim down the canyon.

But Hank clumped along steadily enough tonight, a spray of manzanita blossoms tucked into the band of his greasy hat. He caught it off with his usual elaborate courtesy, mumbling,

"Evenin', lady."

"Good evening," she answered, and turned hastily inside the picket gate.

She heaved a sigh of relief when she reached the homey shelter of her room. Dora set her table, letting the dishes and silverware bump together for the tinkling, companionable noises they made.

The front door opening downstairs brought her upright.

Her first frightened thought of Hank subsided as firm steps climbed the old padded treads, crossed the landing to the room opposite. Maud hadn't gone to the city after all! Gladness surged through her as the door bumped closed.

Cheerful sounds filtered across the hall: a chair pushed aside, a bureau drawer opened, steps muffled on the rug. How different the house seemed now!

Dora's teakettle began to sing, and she took from her cupboard a jar of coffee and her diminutive coffee pot. As she ladled out a spoonful of coffee, a thought sparkled up: Maud might like a cup, too. Her supper at the town cafe was a poor substitute for Ma Ritter's meals. And it would be pleasant visiting with someone tonight, even Maud. She took out an extra cup and saucer and a plate for one of the fat creampuffs.

Tray in hand, she opened her door.

Maud's door was closed tightly. Usually she left it ajar. When one closed her door, Maud said, she wanted her privacy. Dora hesitated a moment, then went the few steps across the landing and knocked.

No answer came.

Dora was turning back to her room when she heard the bed springs creak. She paused.

Steps crossed the floor, and the door opened.

"I thought you might like—" Dora's eyes lifted. The tray in her hands lurched, spilling coffee over the cubes of sugar in the saucer.

Bart Warden's rugged bulk filled the doorway. His hair was rumpled and there was a red crease across his cheeks where he had been lying down.

"MA RITTER moved me up here this morning, and Maud downstairs," he explained. Humor flickered in his eyes. "She wanted to tuck me into the attic out of the way, I guess. The room downstairs was more dressed up for a lady, she said."

Ma's private reasons for putting him up here tied Dora's tongue with chagrin and embarrassment.

"But the stage—" she managed to catch back a shred of breath—"didn't it go out today?"

"Yes, but I couldn't make it." Bart's features knotted slightly. He half bent, a hand on the door casing, visibly waiting for her to leave.

Dora started to back away. Then she stopped, scanning him closely. "Bart, you're sick?"

He grinned weakly, a wave of white washing over his tanned cheeks. "It's nothing much. Some fool thing I ate for lunch." He looked guilty as she glanced beyond him at the cream pie on the dresser three-fourths gone.

"Isn't there something I could do?" She lingered, her shyness forgotten in sympathy.

"No, thanks." But he suddenly backed to a chair and slumped down heavily.

Dora set the tray on a chair and held the cup of coffee out to him. "Drink this," she said.

Bart pulled himself up with an effort, and she held the cup to his lips.

"Come and lie down now," she said when he finished. She helped him across to the bed, tingling at his big arm against her shoulder. "I'll go get something that'll help." She ran across to her room, got out her hot water bottle and filled it with the rest of the hot water in the teakettle. Slipping it into its pink flannel case, she hurried back across the hall.

Bart was sprawled out on Ma Ritter's white bedspread, watching the door for her.

"Here," she said, handing it to him.

Bart gathered the pink woolly bundle toward his middle.

Dora picked up the folded blanket hanging across the foot of the bed and laid it over him.

After a time she asked, "Feel better?"

"Um hum." A wry smile worked Bart's set lips. Drowsily he half opened his eyes, looking at her standing there in the center of his room. Her curly pompadour had dipped sideways over her small uptilted nose flecked with freckles. "Thank you, Dora."

She flushed at his continued regard, and turned her attention to the dresser near the door. It was crowded with masculine articles and Bart's huge black pistol, pointing straight at her. Gingerly she went over and pushed its muzzle toward the wall.

"Don't you know better than to leave a pistol pointing at people like that?"

Warm flecks glinted in Bart's gray eyes. "You don't like guns, do you?"

"They frighten me to death." She gave a small laugh. "They make me think of bandits, or Hank Lendel roaming over town."

"He's harmless. Poor old guy, I saw him down the street, looking as washed up as I felt." Bart stared at the ceiling. "Not many women like guns, Maud says, and her husband away half the time, riding stages."

He had talked it over with Maud? Dora picked up her tray and went back to her neglected supper.

THE NEXT evening Bart returned the hot water bottle.

"What on earth?" Maud gasped from Dora's rocking chair as he stood in the doorway with it dangling from one big finger. Maud had come up to borrow some darning thread.

Bart's wiry hair was combed neatly tonight, and his tanned face glowed with health and vigor.

"Dora saved my life," he explained with a gleam of sheepish humor. Dora saw his eyes taking in Maud draped captivatingly in her one easy chair. In a sumptuous robe of orchid satin, cut alluringly low and edged with feathery white maribou, Maud was a sight to dazzle anyone's eyes.

"Thanks again, Dora," he said, and turned back to his room. As the door shut, Maud's eyes danced with merriment and curiosity.

"Good gosh, Dode, what happened?"

"He had stomach cramps, if you must know." Dora hung the bottle in her closet.

"And you gave him that?" Maud's satin and maribou quivered with a pent up gale of laughter. "You surely know how to be romantic!"

"I wasn't trying to be."

"But never make a man ridiculous, Dode. Couldn't you see how embarrassed the poor old guy was?" Pity and kindness struggled with mirth. "A bandit-catcher like Bart wants to be big and brave to the girl that means anything to him."

"You think I do?"

Maud looked at her, the hilarity subsiding for a moment. Dora's blue princess dress with the pleated flounce molded her slight form gracefully; and her cheeks were as warm as the glinting lights in her hair.

"You little mouse, Dode," Maud laughed, "you're quite a kidder!" She wrapped the robe around her, peering at herself in the mirror on the opposite wall. "Like it, Dode?"

"It's beautiful." Bart's gaze at it had spoken volumes. Dora cleared the film from her voice. "It's stunning."

"It cost me plenty," Maud admitted. "But I figured I could save it for later. It's wise you know—" she slanted her eyes knowingly at Dora—"to give 'em a taste."

Dora managed a smile. She wished Maud would go back downstairs. But Maud wasn't through apparently.

"Guess where I went today."

Dora couldn't.

"All through," Maud paused dramatically, "Bart's house."

Dora bent to the buttonhole she was stitching in a dress for Ma Ritter.

"He was so cute," Maud laughed. "He came into the store and said he wanted to get some rooms papered, and could we give him an idea what colors to choose? Could I, with all my city experience! The boss sent me up there with Bart, and did I give that place a going over!" She went on excitedly, "It'll take a lot of fixing to make it liveable, but Bart's not one to fuss about what his wife wants to do."

His wife...he'd already asked Maud? Dora leaned down to pick a pin from the carpet.

Maud ran on, "With those faded green shutters taken off the windows, and Battenberg lace curtains we'd have something, I told Bart. And between you and me, Dode, I am going to get a gardener and straighten out that yard. Bart thought that mess of violets and dinky old-fashioned flowers were all right. But a front yard needs something showy and dignified, like pampas grass and palms."

PAMPAS grass and palms... Bart's cottage nestling behind its oleander hedge... Dora almost wept as she paused before it the next evening on her way home from work. She slipped inside the sheltering hedge and stood gazing at the violets marching like a tiny purple army along the walk. The crocus and daffodils were thrusting their bright cups above the tangle of weeds.

Desolately Dora knelt and cleared away the tallest weeds.

"Someone has been weeding Bart's garden," Maud told her a few nights later. "It's pathetic how thrilled he is." She winked at Dora. "I told him I needed the exercise."

She had told him that? Dora looked at Maud's pretty hands that shouted to the world their ignorance of weeds or garden trowel. To anyone, fumed Dora, but a blind male!

Her throat ached the next afternoon as she knelt picking violets, the fragrance of them and Bart's whole garden around her. A slight sound caused her to glance behind her.

Bart stood on the pathway, an interested smile on his face, as though pleased to find her here. "Go ahead," he urged as she rose, "take all you want. These old-fashioned beds may not work into the new scheme for the garden."

Dora looked past him at the sunset glowing on the last shaggy hill beyond town.

"Did Maud tell you I'm doing over the place?"

"Yes, she told me."

"What do you think of it, Dora?"

She faced him, gritting her teeth to keep the hot words back, but they stormed up in spite of her. "You want to know what I think?"

"Yes," he nodded, his eyes oddly bright.

"I think it's silly, idiotic, taking off those lovely green shutters. Ruining this darling garden! I think you're dumb! Insane, Bart Warden!" Dora bit back the furious tears and fled down the hill to her room at Ma Ritter's.

A HALF HOUR later she heard Bart down in the dining room with Maud and Ma Ritter. Maud was laughing. Was he telling them about her? Ma would sigh, "Silly sharp-tongued little piece!"

Dora could smell baked ham and yams. She huddled in her rocking chair beside the window, her own supper forgotten, looking out at the twilight deepening over Oldtown's silvery roof tops. The whole house was open to the spring warmth.

Bart came upstairs at last, passed her closed door to his room. She heard his door click shut. Dora sat in the dark, her words burning miserably through her mind.

Presently a second step creaked the stairway. Maud? Oh no! Her hands knotted in her lap, she waited, as the old padded treads squeaked complainingly.

But no gay tap rattled her door.

The quick stride crossed the landing, and Bart's door burst inward. She heard the crash of a chair overturning.

Dora sprang to her feet.

A scuffling sound reached her, the thump of two bodies striking the floor.

She ran to her door, opened it with shaking hand.

Bart lay on his back at the foot of his bed, struggling with the huge bear-like form of Hank Lendel. The newspaper that he had been reading was torn and scattered about on the carpet and in the melee of thrashing legs and arms Dora heard Hank's muttering grunt, "You got my room. My gold's hid here."

She saw the gun clutched in Hank's

hairy paw—Bart's pistol, caught from the dresser beside the door.

Beads of sweat stood out on Bart's forehead as he strained at the insane strength in Hank's arm, trying to drag it aside. But the gun's black muzzle inched downward toward his chest.

With a cry of horror Dora flew across the hall.

"Give me that gun, Hank Lendel!" she screamed. "Give it to me this instant!"

Through a blur she felt her hand snatching at the gun. Felt Hank's arm waver, and the gun leaving his fingers for her own.

With a quick twist, Bart sprang free. For a second he stood, hair on end, his sleeve torn, staring down at the man sprawled at his feet.

Hank's bleary eyes peered up beneath a frowsy mat of iron gray hair. "Did a lady speak?" he quavered.

Dora leaned against the bureau, trembling, as Bart helped him to his feet. All the fire and belligerence of the liquor in him was gone completely. Hank glanced about the room with a sort of wistful bewilderment.

"I thought—" He picked up his battered hat, dusted off the spray of manzanita bloom, set it on his head.

"Hadn't you better get back to your cabin, old boy?" Bart asked gently, taking him by the arm as Ma

Ritter and Maud surged up the stairs.

"Guess I better," Hank mumbled.

He sidled past Dora, tipping his hat to the two female forms crowded on the narrow landing.

"My gold," he mumbled again.

"Your gold!" Ma Ritter scolded down the stairs behind his swaying legs. "What you need is a good strong cup of coffee."

She'd give him one, Dora knew, and a nice hot meal on the back porch.

"Oh, Bart!" Maud caught his arm, leaning against him weakly. "I thought you'd be killed!"

Over her dusky head, Bart's eyes gleamed and twinkled oddly. "Dora saved my life for the second time in a month." He was quite evidently bursting with some inward merriment.

Maud stared at Dora. At him.

Uncertainly Dora glanced down at the gun still clutched in her hand. It wasn't loaded?

Of course it wasn't! She hadn't had sense enough to know that Bart would never leave a loaded gun lying around. That he could have subdued the poor drunken fellow in a few moments more, if she hadn't meddled in.

"So you came to Bart's rescue?" Maud tittered. "Oh, Dode, you'll slay me yet!" Maud clung to Bart, convulsed.

Bart was laughing, too. They were standing there close together, laughing at her, pitying her dumbness.

"Laugh!" she blazed. "Laugh all you want!" She threw down the gun and twisted round to her room, slamming the door shut behind her. Dora leaned against it, swallowing back the tears, but they pressed up like a winter gale, blinding her. Everything she did was wrong! Always!

SHE FINALLY heard Bart's knock on the door.

"Please, Dora—"

She leaned against it, not answering.

"Please," he kept begging, "I want to talk to you, Dora."

She snatched the door open. "Can't you go away and leave me alone?"

He had released himself from Maud somehow; she couldn't see Maud at all as he stood there blocking the doorway. All the laughter was gone from his face.

"You're so wonderful, Dora," he said huskily. "Braver than anyone I've seen in my life."

"The gun wasn't loaded," she flamed, "and you know it."

"But you didn't. And you came with it pointing straight at you. If that wasn't bravery, there isn't any. But you did look so funny and cute, honey." He bent over her, his eyes soft.

"Mother said let a girl do for you and she's yours for the asking—but you mended my coat, took care of me when I was sick, and weeded my garden—"

Dora gasped, "You knew all the time?"

He nodded.

Fuzzily she heard a miffed breath behind him. Heard Maud's taffeta skirt flouncing down the stairs.

"But you and Maud—?"

A thin laugh floated up the stairwall. "I guess he took me out to make you jealous, Dode. To make you see what a fine big hick he is for you." Maud's door banged.

Bart grinned faintly, coloring.

"I thought you liked me, then that night after the concert you ran off upstairs—when I wanted to kiss you."

He gathered her hands in his big ones, and Dora felt weak, deliciously warm and trembly all over.

"I hoped if I fixed up the place, and you saw how nice it was—" he stumbled on, as shy as Ma Ritter had said he could be—"maybe you'd marry me. In spite of the guns."

"The guns," she laughed shakily, "but no pampas grass and palms."

"But violets all over." This time Bart took her into his arms and kissed her.

★

DOUBLE-CROSS GUNS

THRILLING RUSTLER NOVELET

by Donna Reece

Could Alan Barrett trust this girl who dwelt with a vicious rustler gang? Could Lena Sanders love a man wanted in a dozen states for multiple murders and robberies?

WHILE THE storm raged outside, a cowboy, wearing a slicker raincoat, moved along cautiously through the gathering shadows in the long saddleshed. Just beyond the partly-open door at the far end, out under an open-sided extension of the shed, many men worked in frenzied haste around a glowing fire, in which a dozen branding-irons were heating at one time.

The cowboy in the saddleshed tensed warily, like a man who knew it meant death to him if he were discovered here.

Rain beat fiercely on the shed-roof; lightning flickered through the cracks; thunder cannonaded across the sky; a thousand longhorns bellowed madly in unison within the big corrals. The stench of burned hair and hide pervaded the rain-washed air.

Alan Barrett, the man in the slicker, stood in half darkness behind the shed door and watched the twenty-odd men. They worked bawling steers into the tight branding chute built under the eaves of the shed near their fire. No loss of time here, roping and throwing the victims for the red-hot running-irons. This layout was built for wholesale branding, or for venting the brands on thousands of cattle stolen along the Chisholm Trail. No legitimate ranchers were permitted to have spreads and herds here along the Cimarron in Indian Territory.

Barrett had ridden eight hundred miles to scout out the cunningly-hidden rendezvous of the rustler syndicate. Now he knew that his long search was ended. This was certainly the gang he had come to find, the gang that had murdered three scouts before him, the last one being his lifelong friend and partner, Hollis Mayhew. At least, the three had never returned to report. There was only one possible supposition after that. Barrett meant to make certain about the fate of Hollis Mayhew, then—

He suddenly drew back from the door. Two men had left the branding crew and were now a lariat-length away, coming toward the saddle shed door. One was a big-bodied, roughly-dressed man, wearing two hip-guns; the other wore city clothes.

There was no time to escape and reach his hidden horse in the nearby timber. Barrett looked around at the dark corners, found saddle blankets draped on pegs along the wall to dry.

Lena was ready to express her hatred for these outlaws now . . .

Moving quickly to duck under these, his glance fell upon the bright silver spangles of an expensive Texas saddle. There was a familiar contour in the fine leatherwork, like the known features of an old friend. He stopped and bent closer, running hasty hands over the leather kneeflaps above the girth-ends. In the gathering darkness he had to strain his grim blue eyes to confirm the punched lettering that his fingers felt. "Mayhew" was awled through the leather.

Barrett's face paled; his jaws clenched, lips tightened. He snatched his guns and whirled toward the two men who came close to the door. For a moment he stood there braced for battle. Then he made a little shake of his head, impatient with his own hotheadedness. Two seconds later he had tucked under one of those draped blankets against the wall. His booted feet and legs showed beneath the blanket bottom, but he had to risk the chance that the darkening shadows in the corner would protect him.

The booming voice of the big man was speaking as the two men came through the door: "...and Johnny sure orta bring in the rest o' the herd tonight. Then we can run these outa the corrals, bring in the others, finish 'em in the two days and be gone."

"We'll have to move fast," the city-dressed man advised. "This'll be our last drag from the Chisholm herds."

Barrett, tensed and very still, could not see, but he heard the big man stop inside the door.

"Hell, you losin' your nerve, Tyban?" he asked. "What's up? What you hear in Dodge this trip?"

"Plenty talk drifting in from Texas about the three men we finished, especially since that last one, Hollis Mayhew. They'll be sending others. I asked you to come in here so the men wouldn't hear that this layout is to be burned."

"Burnt! What t'hell, Harry! It'll be a damn' cold January 'fore we ever make us another layout as sweet as this'n."

"You'll fan the herds on east, take all the men with you. I'll stay here with Lena till the house and fences are dry enough to burn. When I'm finished, and take the girl to Dodge, there won't be a thing here but ashes."

The last speaker—called Tyban by the big-voiced fellow—walked toward Barrett's hidingplace while he talked. He came to a halt very close to the drying blankets.

"I thought I told you to burn them Texas fellers' saddles," he said sharply. "This silver-spangled one with 'Mayhew' punched in the knee leathers is a dead give-away. They mightn't stretch necks for rustling a few thousand longhorns, but murder—

"Aw, hell, Harry, that cak is worth five hundred dollars. I meant to cut off them leathers and put on new ones."

The two rustler-leaders stood there talking and arguing for several minutes. Alan Barrett, every nerve and muscle taut, held himself erect and still as a set covey of quail. His ears were attuned for the slightest indication that he was discovered. If his enemies should pause in their steady conversation, or should whisper, he must move instantly to avoid the lead that would quickly burrow at him through the blanket.

At least he might put an end to the chief bosses of this gang that had stampeded and stolen herd after herd along the Chisholm Trail for more than two years, leaving the trail crews afoot and unable to organize pursuit until too late. His grip tightened on .45's, thumbs poised to fan hammers

Fortunately an argument, punctuated with loud curses, began among the men under the branding fire shed. The two men near Alan Barrett quit their talk and hurried out the door. Their men were hard-worked and touchy at the close of the long day. Barrett listened intently, then he lifted the blanket edge and stepped clear of his smelly screen.

For a moment he stood before Hollis Mayhew's saddle. He holstered his guns and put his hands on the saddle horn, felt of the cantle and the smooth, deep sweep of the seat. Before his vision came the picture of his friend, the first time Mayhew had proudly ridden in that perfect work of the saddlemaker's art. He turned away, a lump in his throat, lips drawn tight, hatred and a hot craving for vengeance aflame in him.

IN A FEW seconds he was streaking out through the heavy downpour of rain beyond the north end of the shed, hidden from the branding crew by the building. He followed the corral-fence until he was near the bushes and big timber where he had left his tired, wet mustang. He swung into the water-soaked saddle and circled around through the timber to come up in a different direction toward the big log house that the rustler gang had built a hundred yards from the sheds and corrals.

He had come on this dangerous mission with two alternative courses before him. If he located the rustler-layout and judged that he had time

to go to Dodge City, or to herd crews along the Chisholm Trail for help, he must seek forces sufficient to attack and annihilate the outlaws. If it should appear that he had no time to make such a lengthy maneuver, he must take the other alternative and boldly enter the gang as an outlaw, himself on the run from Texas law; learn how and where they marketed

their thousands of stolen longhorns; acquaint himself with the leaders and gang-members; then report.

To facilitate the execution of the last, and more dangerous alternative, he had employed a scheme that has been used many times since.

Only Eli Cockrell, cattlemen's association president, and the Colonel Commanding in Ranger Headquarters at Austin shared the secret. Posters bearing his picture and offer of five thousand dollars reward were distributed. On those posters were lurid, if brief, details of crimes, from horse-stealing to bank-robbery and multiple murder. Many of them were hurried up to Dodge City and other points in southern Kansas with urgent requests from the Ranger headquarters to the law officers to tack them up and be on the lookout for the desperate criminal, "Luke Barrett."

One of the posters, torn as if ripped from a bulletin board, reposed now in Alan's breast-pocket. He would let the outlaws find it on him, as if by accident, giving the impression that his vanity had impelled him to preserve such a dangerous proof of his identity. Although he had heard from the rustler chief's own lips that another spy from the Texas cattlemen was to be expected, he could not give up his carefully-laid plan now.

Coming out of the timber from the west to the partly cleared ground near the big, rambling log house, he slouched in his saddle, hanging over the pommel as if asleep. The rain beat upon him; lightning and thunder battled across the heavens. From under his broad hat-brim, off which water poured in rivulets, he watched the branding crew using up the last bit of dim daylight at the corrals. They seemed anxious to finish with that part of the stolen herd before arrival on the morrow of the other section concerning which Barrett had heard the rustler leaders talk.

He wondered whose big trail-herd this could be; and what had happened to the unfortunate trail crew.

2

BARRETT gently brought his pony to a stop, close to the front door of the double-winged, big house, halting under the branches of a large cottonwood tree. He thought some of those at the corrals a hundred yards away would see him, or somebody inside the house would come out with a challenge.

But the storm, and the pressing business of using up the last minutes of fading daylight at the corrals, caused those outside to give him no notice. Or they thought he was one of their own riders coming in. While he leaned far over as if about to fall from his saddle, simulating sleep, someone opened the door and hurried out to him. Through slitted eyes, glancing from under his hat, he saw the skirts of a woman under the piece of wagon-sheet draped over her head and body. He then remembered the rustler leader's reference to "Lena." This would be his girl. The rain crashed down blindingly.

"Johnny!" a girl's clear voice cried in alarm. "What's happened? Are you hurt?"

She came very close and could see him through the lessened barrier of rain. He wavered and leaned close to her upturned face, saw frightened eyes that stared widely at him.

"Oh!" she screamed low, as if the breath was going suddenly from her.

Barrett half-opened his eyes, partly straightened himself, afraid that the young woman would run back into the house, or scream more loudly to the men at the corrals.

He lifted a hand gropingly to his

hat, in a gesture of tipping it, and said: "Howdy, Miss. I'm dead for sleep—not slept none for days."

He looked about slowly like a man drunk, or still half asleep. The girl watched him curiously, as the rain beat upon her. "Guess my bronc brung me in here. Maybe I'd better mosey on somewhere else." He reached for the reins he had dropped on the mustang's neck.

"Oh, no, no!" the girl cried and seized the right hand rein. "You mustn't leave here now, if you're a stranger. You're not working for Tyban and Honing, are you?"

A loud blast of thunder roared overhead. Barrett lifted left leg over the saddle horn and dropped to the ground beside her. "No, Miss," he said, "I'm not working for nobody, but I'd sure like to get a job. Who's Tyban and Honing? They run this spread?"

"Yes—that is—." She hesitated and the look of fright came again into her eyes. "You better hitch your pony to that horseshoe rack in the side of the tree and come in the house."

He did as directed. The girl led him inside. She stood by the open door until he had stepped in, then glanced out toward the corrals. She shut the door quickly, threw off the dripping piece of wagon sheet and stared at Barrett in the murky light coming through two open windows there in front. Burning sticks of wood in a fireplace at the far end of the long room gave flickering aid to the fading daylight. He took off his raincoat.

"Two of them are coming!" she said with repressed excitement. "Jock Honing and Harry Tyban, the big bosses. I don't know who you are and there's no time to find out. If you're an honest man, you're in terrible danger here. Go to the fireplace, quick. Make out that you're asleep, but don't sleep! Listen to what I tell them! Hurry!"

Her manner was very mystifying. He had pictured "Lena" as a hardened woman of the outlaws. She had black, glossy hair combed straight back from a high forehead and plaited into a single thick strand that hung down over the back of her checkered calico dress. Her fair, oval face and her dark eyes were very pretty, Barrett thought, and she was not over twenty years old. She watched him with a warm, but anxious gaze as he stood, tall and broad-shouldered, slinging water from his hat, running fingers through his blond hair.

"Hurry!" she repeated, clenching her hands nervously.

He hurried then to obey her.

THE WIDE, long room was enormous. A double-row of bunks lined the walls. At each side of the fireplace, at the back end, doors connected this with other compartments. The door at the left was open and Barrett looked into a big kitchen-dining room. One man was setting tin plates on the long table, while another was busy at cooking operations before a big fireplace built into the center of the far wall.

Barrett dropped into a home-made, hide-bottomed chair that sat in front of the fireplace. He spread his legs to the warmth of the flames as if intent on drying his wet pants. His rain-soaked Stetson was on his head, tilted to cover his eyes. He felt of the folded poster in the breast pocket of his shirt, fixed it so the corner would protrude visibly, then let arms fall loosely, as if he were asleep. The girl was quietly waiting at the front door.

The men she had said were coming delayed on their arrival. Through the drone of rain on the roof, Barrett heard the rumble of voices under the cottonwood tree in front. He surmised that his pony and trappings were being investigated. Then the voices grew more distinct, coming toward the door.

The door was shoved open roughly and a man spoke quietly to the girl.

"Lena, who's that Texan that rid in on that flea-bit skate out there? Uh-huh! Warming himself, huh?" He had evidently spied Barrett lying limply in the chair.

"Sh-h-h!" the girl hissed. "He was sound asleep on his pony. I thought at first he was Brother Johnny. I got him half awake and he said he hadn't slept for days. He fell off his horse and stumbled in here and went to sleep there almost by the time he sat down. I believe he's running from the law."

"A very likely story. We'll damn' soon find out!"

Two pairs of heavy feet strode down the long length of the bunk room with another lighter pair of shoes pattering along after them. Barrett kept his eyes closed lightly like a man in sound sleep and breathed regularly, heavily, his mouth slightly open. He could feel the near presence of one man as the latter stooped to spy under his hat brim and watch his face.

Suddenly his two guns were seized and jerked from the holsters. Barrett stirred lazily, lifted a hand to shove his hat back and looked up at the two men with eyes that were hazily half open. He blinked slowly with deceptive sleepiness, then moved to arise.

"Was sure sleepy—cain't keep my

Mayhew had been trapped . . .

blinkers open," he said slowly. "I been—"

"Set down!" the big man rasped before him and shoved him back into the chair. "How come you to blow in here, feller? Wake up and talk? Who sent you?"

Barrett looked up at the beefy, red-faced man before him and glanced to the left at the tall, darkly handsome man who looked down at him silently with beaming, curious eyes. This man was dressed in clothes that were new and well tailored.

"Nobody sent me," Barrett replied, rubbing his eyes. "I got tired of tearing my shanks on Texas cactus for twenty dollars a month and boiled beans. Rode north, heading for Kansas and Wyoming—anywhere to get a job riding. You need a good 'puncher here?"

"Never mind that," the man in front commanded sharply. "You ain't answered my question. How'd you come to drift in here?"

"When I lit out from Fort Worth, I headed straight for the north star, a-riding day and night. I saw your fire smoke this evening and got 'crost the river above the quicksands. Was so tired, went to sleep in the saddle. woke up here—guess my bronc found the way in."

"What's that?" the beefy man reached out and snatched the poster from Barrett's left breast pocket.

"Hey, gimme that!" Barrett cried and grabbed the paper, tearing most of it from the man's hand.

He made an awkward attempt to throw what he had retrieved of the paper into the flames of the fireplace. A bony fist smashed against the side of his face, knocking him back against the tall city-dressed man. Four hands grasped him. The paper he had clenched in his right fist was pried from gripping fingers.

The red-faced, big man straightened out the crumpled paper and pieced it to the smaller fragment he had retained. He stooped to examine it by the light of the flames. The girl stood silently nearby, her hands clasping and unclasping nervously as she looked on.

"I'll be damned!" the reader of the poster finally exclaimed after several moments of laborious readings. He looked around at Barrett, studied his face a few seconds critically, glanced again at the picture on the poster. "It's him, all right, Harry. Luke Barrett, wanted in Texas for more murders and bank hold-ups than I thought had ever been pulled off in that whole State. Look!"

3

BARRETT heard the girl behind him gasp and walk quickly away.

"I don't wonder he was so plastered with want of shut-eye," the big man went on while the man he called Harry read the poster. "You had 'nough to run from not to sleep none this side o' Canady, feller."

Barrett sat down in the chair and gestured resignedly with his hands. He said: "All right, you got me. I was sure a locoed fool to tear that off and keep it. I wanta make a deal with you fellers."

"What sorta deal?"

"I promise not to make you no trouble if you promise to deliver me alive and collect your five thousand. There ain't a jail in Texas that can hold me. I'll get out, so I don't hafta stir up no trouble for you fellers and catch your lead. 'S 'at a deal?"

The red-faced big man, whom Barrett guessed was the Jock Honing of the pair the girl had named, began laughing hilariously and leaned against the mantel. Harry Tyban remained as silent as ever, still looking at the poster.

"Just take it easy, Luke," Honing advised jovially. "I seen that poster stuck up all over Dodge a week or so back. You go on up thataway and the other Luke—Luke Short—marshal up there, would sure nab you. We ain't lookin' for no blood-money; we might even give you a job if you wanta hang 'round with us, eh, Harry?"

Handsome Harry Tyban looked up from the poster with a scowl and said: "Not so fast, Jock. You know the rules. When a man proves himself, he can join up. We'll give Barrett his chance soon. Until then, he can do without his guns. Go lock them in the box and tell Buck to bring in his saddle pack and put up his bronc.

He turned to look at the girl who stood watching the gathering darkness through the open-shuttered left-hand window by the front door. She turned with a quick start and came down the long room toward the fireplace. Barrett saw her drying tears from her face with bare hands.

Tyban went into the room at the right to the fireplace and Lena followed him without a word. Jock Honing had gone into the kitchen and was speaking to "Buck," giving orders about Barrett's pack and horse. A rush of voices sounded outside as a large number of men came running through the rain in toward

Barrett backed away, and Tyban flung off the girl.

the kitchen. Barrett heard them washing hands and faces on a gallery outside the kitchen-dining room, talking loudly in rough banter. He turned his attention from them and listened for sounds from the room whence Lena had gone to Tyban's beckoning.

He heard the girl's voice raised in tearful protest against something, but there came only a faint murmur of Tyban's heavier voice. In about two minutes Tyban came out, his face dark with anger. Barrett stood with his back to the fire, drying his pants. Tyban scowled and said:

"Better go wash up, Barrett, and get ready for the chuck table if you want to eat 'fore that hungry bunch grabs it all."

He went on into the kitchen. Barrett said after him: "Sorta drying out yet. I'll be 'long. I'm more sleepy than hungry."

Lena came out, her face still more tearful and agitated than when she had entered the room. She started to pass Barrett and go on back to the front of the big bunk room.

"Miss Lena!" Barrett whispered loudly, watching her.

She hesitated, then looked around

at him. There was fear and dislike in her dark eyes.

"What's the trouble?" Barrett asked, still whispering. "Please trust me. I'd help you, even if they kill me for it." He wondered if she could tell him anything about Hollis Mayhew's death.

She brightened for a flickering half second, then caught herself back from coming toward him. As she turned on toward the front, she murmured barely loud enough for him to hear. "You're a murderer—just another killer outlaw and rustler like they're making of my brother. I hate every one of you!"

Suddenly Barrett realized what a fool he might be making of himself. He knew that the girl was genuinely bothered about something, but she had gone quite willingly to Tyban's call. What if she was acting a part? What if she was part of the "proving" to which Barrett, himself, must be submitted? It was not the most believable thing in the world, but his position was too dangerous to risk falling into a trap.

AFTER SUPPER nobody went to bed. Lena, Tyban and Honing disappeared into that other room. The men, talking and smoking, sat around in the light given off by the fireplace. They gave little notice to Barrett.

The storm did not abate its fury. Frequent flashes of lightning whitened the windows at the front and deafening claps of thunder made the house tremble. Rain beat upon the roof in a steadily hissing torrent.

"They'll never git the rest o' the longhorned, wild devils in here through this hell-buster," one man declared, listening to the furious elements outside.

"They'll do plenty to git jest themselves in 'crost that risin' crick," another added. "This ain't gonna let up soon."

"Harry'll raise hell with Johnny Sanders if he don't git 'em in," still another, a hard-eyed, bearded man said. "It's more'n half the herd—'bout three thousand head."

"Johnny Sanders!" Barrett repeated the name mentally. "Lena Sanders!"

"I still don't see w'y Harry'd leave the kid in charge o' bringin' 'em in. That's a job fer a lots tougher herd boss."

Several men laughed then. Barrett recognized the note of wise reserve in the laughter. One of those who laughed finally dared to half explain.

"You sure cain't see fur ahead o' your nose, Winky," he said. "Harry's workin' the kid in—wants to make a man o' his young cousin, maybe change the way a certain young lady looks at things."

It was nearly midnight before the growing tension of expectant waiting was broken. Tyban and Honing had came out of the other room long before.

Alan Barrett pretended to sleep for a two hour stretch in one of the bunks, hat over his face, but he remained keenly awake. When the general cry of "There they come!" went up and everybody ran out into the rain, he slipped from the bunk.

Within a few minutes there was nothing but a confusion of voices, loud talk, cursing and threats bandied back and forth out toward the corrals. Lanterns had been lighted.

Barrett debated whether to go out or remain and try to get further information from the troubled girl. He was alone until Lena Sanders came out of the other room and picked up the piece of wagon sheet she had used before. She did not look at Barrett.

"Where'd the feller put my mackintosh?" he asked. "I'll go with you if you gotta go out there, Miss Sanders."

". . . Then we found out that Johnny had been framed; his name had appeared on a list of wanted rustlers, and he had to do what he was told . . ."

She held the piece of canvas poised, ready to throw over her head and shoulders, looking at him with a strangely studious gaze. A wry twist played upon her full, shapely lips. He read unspoken contempt in her expression and for the first time in his life he felt the belittling sting of humiliation before a woman's glance. It hurt, coming from Lena Sanders. He realized then that he very much wanted her to know that he was no outlaw, but he dared not risk telling her the truth. This could all be a cunningly staged test of him.

"I don't know why I should tell you," she said, quiet scorn in the strength of her voice, "but I guess I'd try to save the life of a snapping, mad cur if Harry Tyban was going to kill it. They are going to let you stay for a little while, then they'll take you along to Dodge. Just outside of town you'll be shot and your body delivered to the law for the blood money you're worth."

"How could they get away with that, they being criminals, themselves?" Barrett asked the girl, suspicious still that he was being tested.

"You poor fool!" she said, lifting the canvas to her shoulders. She stepped over nearer him and looked out into the roaring, dark inferno of the storm. "Harry Tyban is a respected business man in Dodge. He is a second cousin of Johnny and me. We were orphans and he helped us. Got us to come down from Hays City where a gunman, like you, killed our father. He gave Johnny work as a cowboy down here, helping to drive cattle to the railroad points in eastern Kansas. We never suspected that the cattle were rustled stock until he told Johnny the other day that he would have to help steal this big herd that was on its way up the Chisholm Trail. Johnny refused. Harry showed him a list of rustlers wanted by the law. Johnny's name was on that list. Then we knew that Harry Tyban had done that to Johnny to brand him and make him—and me—do what he wanted."

"Part of what he wanted was that you marry him," Barrett accused. She looked around at him suddenly, startled.

"How did you know that?" she demanded quickly. "Did you overhear —yes, you eavesdropped at the door of that room tonight!"

"I did not; I put two and two together. Been thinking you might be helping 'em try me out, but maybe you're not. You look sorta skeered, yourself, you poor kid."

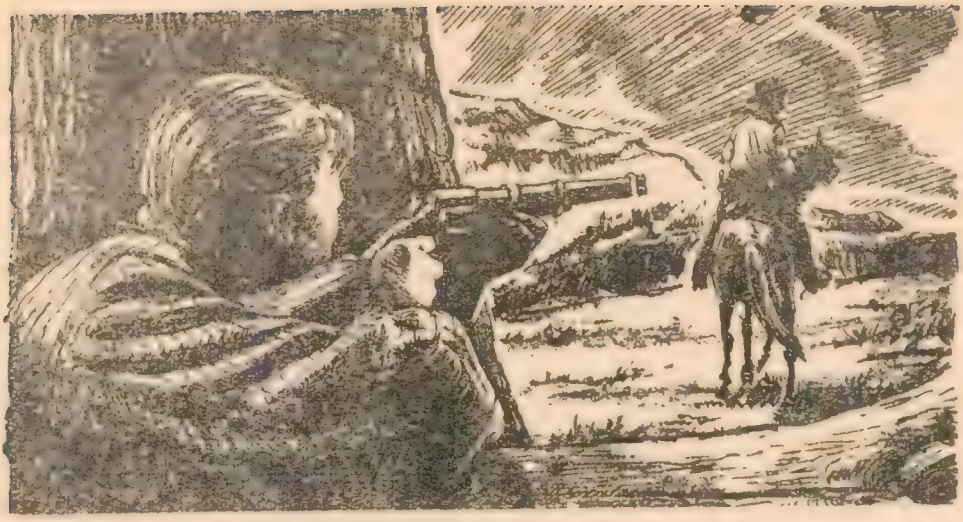
She drew back from him, a spasm of loathing wrenching her face. "You! You thought I would help Harry Tyban try you out? Ugh! If you knew how I hate every one of them —you—killers, rustlers, outlaws!"

4

SHE THREW the wagon-sheet over her head and started toward the door. Harry Tyban suddenly appeared in the doorway, blocking her exit. He had a hand out, roughly shoved her backward toward Barrett. There was a malevolent grin on the rustler leader's dark face. He glanced at Barrett and said:

"So you tried to make love to the pretty filly, eh, Barrett?" There was menace in his harsh tone. "Fast worker, but you got her opinion of us. I came back to see why you didn't come out with us, Barrett. You'll get your test out there pretty quick. If you've got the nerve to put the finish to a bunch of nosy Texas cowboys, you're in a soft bunk. If you don't!"

He finished with a rising inflection



on the last word and a snap of thumb and forefinger, then turned his scowling glance to the girl.

"Get back in the room, Lena," he ordered. "I'll have to lock you in this time. What's going on out by the corrals is no sight for your pretty eyes."

"I won't!" she cried, backing away from his reach. "I'm going to Johnny! He and I will leave here tonight, Harry Tyban, and you'd better not try to stop us!"

She tried to dart around him. His arm swung in a flashing arc. With the open palm of his hand he slapped her viciously on the full of her face. The blow knocked her upon her back on the floor. Barrett saw the blow, the falling girl, her terrified face, and gave up all thought of caution. He made a lunging grasp for the guns at Tyban's hips.

Tyban was quick and lithe as an angry jungle tiger. He saw the attack coming a fraction of a second before Barrett's fingers reached the gun handles. He jerked back as he brought up a short, hard jab to Barrett's face.

The bruising knuckles hurt the Texan's cheek, but did not deflect his onrushing attack. He knew that not only his life, but those of some captured Texas cowboys outside, perhaps those of the girl and her brother, depended on him now. He matched the quick agility of Harry Tyban and drove a lightning blow with frenzied strength to the face of the handsome gang leader.

Tyban staggered back and would have fallen but for the bunk frame against which he braced himself. His right hand flicked up with a gun in it. Lena Sanders was on her feet again. She darted in and grasped the gun with both hands, screaming at Tyban. Her words were incoherent to Alan Barrett in the midst of a terrific roar of thunder outside. He feared the enraged rustler chief would kill the girl if forced. He backed away, making a gesture of surrender as Tyban flung off the girl's grasp. To fight further here was hopeless. Maybe outside they would put a gun in his hands with which to kill those Texas cowboys Tyban mentioned. Then he could sell his life for a price that he could not possibly claim here, maybe take additional toll for Hollis Mayhew.

"All right, Tyban," he shouted above the dying thunder clap. "I just lost my head for a second, I guess. Go on and give me that test and I'll prove to you how I stand with you."

Tyban took out a handkerchief with his left hand while his right held the gun menacingly upon Barrett. He began a mirthless laughter and shook his head slowly as he wiped at blood which flowed from his nose.

"I'll give you what's coming to you later, Barrett," he said. "I know all I want to about you now. Get that rope from under the bunk over there, Lena. Hurry up and snap into it!"

He nodded toward a bunk behind Barrett. The girl stood looking at him as if suddenly dazed.

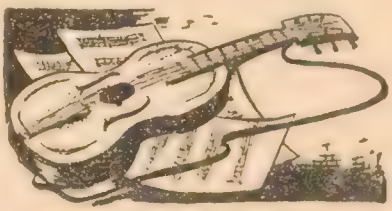
"Snap into it, I say!" he commanded more harshly, waving his gun. "If you don't want a slug of lead for both of you right here and one for your fool brother out yonder, you'd better move fast and do what I say."

IN ABOUT two minutes Barrett was securely tied, hand and foot, and left lying on the floor beside the middle bunks of the long room. Tyban forced the girl at the point of gun to go back into the room at the right of the fireplace, then locked the door and pocketed the key. He laughed again, a deep, pleased chuckle, as he passed on his way out into the storm.

With not an extra second to lose, Barrett went into action one second after Tyban closed the door. He began rolling over and over toward the fireplace. The rope thongs around his ankles were tied over the leather of his boots. There were enough flame and live coals in the fireplace to burn the ropes if he could endure the agony.

He reached the fireplace, twisted around and lifted his boots with the binding ropes in upon the flaming coals and chunks of wood. Once his feet were free and he could walk, he would find a way to free his hands. He gritted his teeth against the quick bite of the flames around his ankles.

An unusual sound came from the door to the girl's prison room. There was a sudden splintering of wood and screech of metal. The door came open and Lena Sanders emerged with an ax in her hands. She looked with horror in her eyes at what Alan Barrett was doing. Quick comprehension flashed over her face as he jerked his feet around toward her. The ropes were burning.



"Cut them quick—cut the ropes, Lena!" he cried. "I'm not an outlaw—the poster was faked to get me in this gang. You've got to help me bust them!"

He saw the sudden pleasure light her face, but she said nothing, for, with her, thought was movement. She stooped and sliced the ropes between his ankles, kicking the burning pieces back.

"You poor boy!" she murmured low. "How it must be hurting—that fire. Turn over!"

It took but a moment for the nimble-handed girl to cut the wrist thongs with the ax. While she worked she said: "Fool Harry threatened before to lock me in and I got ready for the day—hid an ax in under my bed. Come on! They may be killing Johnny!"

She ran down the length of the room like an antelope speeding from danger, scooped up the piece of wagon sheet from the floor and was out the door before she could heed his cries.

"Wait!" he called, leaping to his feet. "We've gotta find guns! Wait, Lena!"

Thunder drowned his shouted words as she jerked open the door. She plunged into the storm. A blinding flash of lightning made the whole world outside whiter than in mid-day sunlight. He sped out after her. Within ten steps the rain had him soaking wet to the skin, and cooled the still painful heat of the boot leather on his ankles.

Men's voices were lifted in loud, impassioned cries under the long branding shed, but the words were indistinguishable because of the thunder overhead and the bawling of countless frightened, maddened longhorns penned within the corrals.

The girl led the race on to the end of the shed. A great many more men were crowded under the shed than Barrett had seen in the house —more than twice as many. They were packed closely. He relied on the chance that Tyban had not yet told his men that he and the girl were prisoners in the house. Lena Sanders hesitated behind the close phalanx of first men who were intent on watching some tableau being enacted in the middle of the shed-covered space where lanterns lit the scene.

Barrett stood beside the girl, his hand touching her back protectively. She leaned trustingly against him, tensed, and gripped his left hand. She listened to the words of a young man who spoke vehemently in that lighted circle of packed men.

"I've told you straight, Harry," the agitated, youthful voice was saying, "they got horses from some other trail crew. They tracked our part of the herd and jumped us just 'fore the storm broke, stampeded the herd in the fork of the Cimarron and a big creek. Less'n half the boys was with me behind the herd and they killed some of them before our other men got together and come in behind these here Texans. We cooped 'em up under some trees. A few of them was killed before their ammunition give out and the others give up. Jukes and the others wanted to shoot them down. I wouldn't let 'em. I wouldn't have such cold-blooded murder on my hands. I wanted to let 'em go, but Jukes said he'd kill me if I didn't bring the fellers in here for you to 'tend to. That's all of it. We brought them in. Here they are. If you want to murder them in cold blood, that's your business. You've made a rustler out of me, Harry Tyban, but you won't make a murderer out of—"

The hysterical, high-pitched voice shut off suddenly as an unmistakable sound of smashing fist squashed the words in the youth's mouth. Lena Sanders smothered a scream and clutched Barrett's arm frenziedly. He pulled away, whispered for her to wait there for him, and ran over to the high pole fence, where the rain again beat upon him.

HE CLIMBED to the highest pole and looked over the heads of the packed mob. In the light of the lanterns over the center of the shed he saw and quickly counted fourteen wet and bedraggled cowboys, hands tied behind them, circled by thirty-five or forty rustlers. A young fellow was just picking himself up from the ground before Harry Tyban and Jock Honing.

Tyban spoke with measured vehemence to the youth: "Now, we'll see, Johnny, if you'll have anything to do with it. I've been patient with you and Lena, but tonight I've decided to bring things to a head. You'll do what I say, or I'll fill you full of lead. I won't trust you with a gun any more, or I'd make you kill them, yourself, one by one.

"We'll tend to them like we finished the sneaking spies that come up from Texas. Take those ropes from the posts over there, Johnny, and get busy tying the ankles of

them Texas skunks, and see that you tie them good and tight."

"Good gawd, Harry, you can't do that to all these here men!" the wild-faced youth cried, looking at Tyban with horror in his stare. He wiped blood from his mouth. "I won't help! Go ahead and shoot me! I won't do it!"

Barrett, watching the tense scene under the shed as he sat in the pouring rain on the corral fence, was not aware of the girl's presence until she was nearly to the top of the fence behind him and very close. He turned and helped her to a secure seat beside him on the topmost pole while he held them both steady with an arm around the post in front of him. His left arm was around the girl's waist.

With a shock he saw the gun in the girl's hand as she lifted it toward Harry Tyban. He seized the big gun and easily wrenched it from her grasp. They nearly fell from the fence, but he regained their balance and held her closely.

She hissed at him: "I thought you said you would help me! Harry Tyban is going to kill my brother! Give me that gun!"

"Listen, girl!" he whispered hastily. "I promise to plant a bullet in Tyban straighter'n you could, if he starts to shoot the kid. I've got a better idea. What is it they aim to do to them cowboys?"

"They'll tie them up, drag a green cowhide all over them to put the smell of fresh-killed beef on them, push them out in the corral and throw the green hide close to them. The longhorns go mad when they smell fresh hide and then they paw and hook and tear the men to pieces. That's what happened to three other men in the last year or so.

"Was the last of them other three named Hollis Mayhew?" he asked, a steely snap to his words.

"Yes. He was the last. I saw them take him out here to the longhorns and heard them laughing and calling filthy names because he wouldn't howl and beg for mercy while the longhorns tore him to pieces."

"Damn 'em!" Barrett gritted out, forgetting the girl as he gazed with livid hatred at Tyban and Honing. "The dirty, murdering yellerbacks!"

"If you've got a speck of manhood in you," the girl urged, "go ahead now and kill Harry Tyban and Jock Honing. They're back of it all!"

"Don't push me out of my judgment," he growled at her. "I've got plenty reason to get the devils if that's what they done to my old pardner, Hollis Mayhew. The stinking, lousy coyotes!"

They watched while the pale, cowed brother of Lena Sanders gave in to the menacing command of Harry Tyban. Slowly, reluctantly the youth began to prepare ropes for tying the prisoners' ankles. Some of the surrounding men laughed when they saw the surrender of the fearful young man. Lena Sanders again begged Barrett to shoot Harry Tyban.

"Where'd they put my guns?" he asked her. "Where's that gun box?"

"In the kitchen, but it's padlocked and Jock Honing has the key."

"Let's get that ax you had and the poker I saw by the kitchen fireplace! Come on, quick!"

He dropped to the ground and helped the girl down. They were ten feet from the nearest of the men who gave all of their attention to the ugly work under the shed. Barrett caught Lena's hand and ran with her toward the porch of the kitchen. While he was holstering the gun he had taken from her, he bumped into a tree. The blackness of the night seemed thick enough to slice. Lena drew him over to the right and guided their run on to the porch.

5

THEY RUSHED into the big kitchen-dining room. Barrett ran to the fireplace where a few end pieces of wood still gave off a dull glow of live coals. He snatched up the black poker rod. Lena brought him the ax from the other room.

"Where's the box?" he demanded.

She led him to a far corner where only the merest film of light from the fireplace reached. He had to feel of the big, long box to find the heavy padlock. While he worked to force the blade of the ax under the lid of the box, he asked the girl:

"Have they got many guns—and ammunition in here?"

"All of the extra supplies," she said. "I don't know how much."

It was a big box, three feet high and as wide. Barrett did not take time to measure its length in the darkness. He pried up with the ax, got the lid open a half inch and slipped the poker rod through the crack. The padlock and chain gave off a metallic crunching and screeching under his attack, but the lid held.

He slipped the iron poker through the chain and bent it badly in his straining effort to break the lock or splinter the lid top where the steel chain links passed through a hole. There came an extra brilliant flash of lightning. Barrett dropped the poker and lifted the ax hurriedly, just in time for the volcanic roar of thunder that followed the lightning. He struck fiercely with all of his might, making a slanting stroke with the point of the ax blade at the lid edge beside the chain, near the hole. The noise of the stroke was effectually smothered by the thunder. Lena Sanders, standing near in tensed waiting, made a cry of surprise.

With the ax blade again shoved under the lid, Barrett pried again and felt the thick, hewn wood of the lid bulge and give under his attack. A moment more and it splintered and cracked as the chain finally gave up its hold. He threw the lid back and poked the ax handle exploringly around in the box. Metal clinked. He felt with his hands and found rifles and six-guns. At one end of the long, deep box there were paste-board boxes filled with cartridges. He could tell by their size and weight that they were both Winchester and six-gun cartridges.

Hastily he lifted out six-guns. There were still many more in the box after he had counted out fourteen weapons that he believed, judging by the bore of the muzzles, to be .45's.

"What are you going to do with all these guns?" Lena asked, standing over him.

"I hate to tell you 'fore I try it out," was all he would answer.

He began filling his pockets and shirt bosom with .45 cartridge boxes. He tore open some boxes and worked feverishly loading the fourteen empty .45's he had laid out on the floor. When he had loaded the last gun, he arose and spoke to the girl.

"Give me that piece of wagon sheet to tote these guns in. You stay in the house—find a safe place out of bullet reach."

He dragged the wagon sheet from her shoulders. She protested and demanded more information, pleaded for a chance to help him.

"You can help," he snapped in his great haste. "Get me the sharpest knife the cook's got here. Hurry!"

She ran away to a side table beyond the fireplace and came back in a moment, pushed a sharp-edged bowie knife into his hand. He stuck it under his belt, picked up the corners of the wagon sheet onto which he had piled the fourteen guns, slung the load over his shoulder and ran for the

door to the porch. The girl ran beside him and cried:

"For Heaven's sake, tell me what you intend to do! Listen! They're throwing those helpless cowboys into the cowpens now—the cattle are going mad!"

"Stay in the house!" he ordered. "There's gonna be hell popping out there pretty soon! Stay back!"

"I won't!" she screamed against the fury of the storm, running out on the ground after him. "Johnny's out there! I've got to find him—get him away!"

"All right, but do it quick and get clear away before bullets start flying!"

He jogged along swiftly under his heavy burden. She darted away in the darkness toward the dim reflection of lantern light above the heads of the mob under the shed. Some of the many men were climbing back over the high pole fence from inside the corral this side of the branding chute. Their frantically hurrying forms were barely visible shadows as Barrett rushed on toward them. He knew from the increased fury of bawling inside the fence and from the different tone of the fearful sounds that the bound Texans were already stretched helplessly upon the ground inside, ready for the gory slaughter.

There was a continuous uproar of shouting voices along the fence as the followers of Tyban and Honing, perhaps the two leaders, themselves, tried to see into the dark corral. The rain was still slashing down so furiously that it seemed impossible to bring the lanterns from under the shed to turn their light upon the tragedy about to occur.

Barrett turned in behind a corner of the corral fence some twenty steps from the nearest of the rustlers. The fence made a bend off to the right. He followed that line for a few steps and then boldly climbed to the top pole, going with great effort, having only one free hand.

The fury of the longhorned beasts milling about in the mud and darkness only a little distance away was working up to the point of attack. The peculiar bellowing which cattle emit at smell of raw, fresh beef was rending the night. Countless horns clacked together in the closely packed, churning, moving mass.

WITH HIS gun drawn in right hand, Barrett dropped to the ground inside the corral. His boots sank deeply in the mud. For a few seconds his blood ran cold, chilling fear and hopelessness flashed over him. He stood there, realizing how extremely slight were his chances of finding the bound men that he was certain had been dropped somewhere inside the corral. The fact that the wild cattle had been temporarily frightened back from this west side of the pen convinced him that somewhere nearby he would find the struggling, desperate cowboys trying, no doubt, to free each other before the death-dealing hoofs and horns found them.

A flickering gleam of lightning gave a second of illumination which was only enough for a blurred vision. Barrett was still pressing against the fence, on the point of starting out across the corral in his perilous search. Dimly he saw struggling shapes on the ground slightly to his left, nearer the other line of fence. Many men clung to the top poles over there while they waited for the fury of the longhorns to bring the agonized, terrified cries from the victims. Another, longer flash and those killers who waited so ghoulishly for their entertainment would see this threatened interruption of their circus.

Barrett had had his face turned more to the left during the flicking flash of lightning and had not seen how

close were the nearest pawing, bellowing animals. He could hesitate no longer. Those moving shapes on the ground could be no other than the intended victims. He ran toward the nearest that he had seen. The distance was shorter than he had calculated. His feet struck a moving body and the man he touched shrieked in terror, obviously believing that a longhorn was upon him. A sudden burst of louder shouts and laughter came from the fence top.

Dropping to his knees in the mud, Barrett deposited the bundle of guns and spoke low to the terrified man.

"Quiet, pardner!" he warned. "I'm a friend—gonna cut you loose—give you a gun—all of you!"

While he spoke he jerked the bowie knife from his belt and was feeling for the muddied man's thongs. He found that this man was not only bound hand and foot, but was tied to the next man. They were all tied together in a chain so that they could not roll individually toward the fence and lessened danger against the poles. This much Barrett quickly surmised, even before the frightened cowboy regained his wits and spoke.

"Who're you, feller?" the prostrate man demanded. "You sure 'nough gonna git us out?"

The neighboring man raised up on one elbow partially and asked a similar question, a threat of hysteria in his voice. Barrett did not answer with words. He had already cut the cords of rope around the first man's wrists, was reaching for those about his ankles. A blinding flash of lightning came then. Barrett fell over, flattened himself beside the man he had freed. The white flash died out, leaving them again in utter darkness while the thunder rolled overhead and rain crashed down in renewed fury.

"Here," Barrett ordered the freed man, "grab the corners of this canvass—don't spill the guns—stick one in your belt, or pants! Drag 'em along—give one to every man as I cut 'im loose. Here, take this box of cartridges! If the lightning comes again, lie flat quick!"

By the time he got to the third man in his frenzied use of the keen-edged knife he knew that the black mass of maddened cattle were crowding in upon them, working up their courage for the attack. The bellowing and clacking of horns was a constant, deafening refrain. The shouts of the men on the fence were scarcely audible now, drowned by the nearer uproar of the herd. Barrett warned the freed men not to shoot the threatening longhorns unless these actually charged upon them.

The seventh man had been freed.

Barrett was having to repeatedly warn the rejoicing cowboys to withhold their exuberance and remain on the ground where they had been for fear another flash of lightning would reveal to their enemies what was going on. He told them to wait for the signal when the last man was freed.

A lull came to the bawling of the cattle as if a subtle message had been flashed among them. That was ominous to the men who were wise in the ways of the beasts. Some of the long-

horns were at last advancing to the attack. Perhaps these attackers would paw up a few more splashes of mud, then the rush, the swish of killing horns and plunging hoofs.

"What the devil's goin' on in there?" somebody at the fence yelled and then Barrett, knifing at the ropes of the eighth prisoner, recognized the voice of Jock Honing. "Somebody hang a hat over one o' the lanterns and bring it out here! Harry, them longhorned sons o' Satan are takin' mighty long to get started!"

One of the freed cowboys crawled after Barrett and said: "I got a jackknife the skunks didn't find, pardner! Let me help cut 'em loose!"

"Crawl down to the last man and come this way, then!" Barrett commanded.

THEN CAME the cracking of hoof joints, the squashing of mud and deafening chorus of mad cow bellows as a black wave of longhorn bulls swept across the muddy ground, heads lowered, ferocious, keen-pointed horns slashing. Barrett threw himself in a straight line beside the eighth man whom he had just freed, pulling the man down flat and shouting to the man toiling along with the guns to lie down.

His warning to the first man he had freed was too late. The fearful excitable fellow fired his gun point-blank into the face of a charging longhorn. Men on the fence were yelling with gleeful anticipation. More guns spat jets of flame, their explosions blanketed by the greater uproar of the herd. The charging wave of animals passed, split up, frightened by the flash of guns, piled up against the fence.

Barrett heard the groans of a man nearby who had not yet been cut loose, heard them faintly through the tumult of shouted questions and hoarse yells at the fence. He found the man had been stepped upon and hurt painfully. In a few seconds he had freed that one and was working over another when the men already freed crowded around him, crouching, guns in hand, shouting questions.

"If any of you've got knives, get busy!" Barrett shouted at them.

The steer that the man with the guns had shot down kicked wildly in the mud, splashing rain water and mud in every direction. Some of the free men went on down the line of prostrate prisoners. A faint ray of yellow light suddenly shone on the scene. Floundering, bellowing cattle crowded in the short space between Barrett and the fence, pawing at the ground, or milling about, preparing to charge back in another attack.

6

SOMEBODY held a lantern up near the top poles of the fence behind the cattle. Its light was not strong enough to reveal clearly what was happening out in the corral. Obviously the onlookers were mystified, still uncertain whether those were gunshots or clashing, sparking horns they had seen in the tumult of the charging cattle. If it had not been so impossible to believe, they would have known those flashes and muffled roar of guns for what they were.

Two more lanterns now appeared on the fence, sheltered by broad-brimmed hats. Curious men crowded the top of that fence, peering over the scared, bawling cattle out toward the open space where the helpless prisoners should be. One man with a lantern waved the flickering light at the cattle and yelled. The beasts broke away then, frightened by the light and shouting men, but they did not charge upon the men on the ground. They still remembered the dreaded gunshots

[*Turn To Page* 122]

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that had come from those hated human forms. They cut a wide circle, some going around each side of the men Alan Barrett had.

The last of the men were free and armed with one gun apiece and a box of cartridges. They gathered in a huddle around Barrett a moment before the cattle broke away from against the fence to circle them and run for the main herd.

"Scatter, men!" Barrett ordered. "Thin out and charge the fence—give 'em all you got! Make every shot count, 'cause they got us outnumbered three to one! On 'em, now! Here I go, Hollis, old pardner!"

He fired the first shot and leaped toward the fence. His shot knocked a man from the top pole. He looked for Tyban and Honing before he fired the next shot, but seeing neither in the poor light of the lanterns, he fired at one of those who went tumbling from the fence then in a wild scramble before the hail of lead. Every one of the cowboys rushed the fence, firing as they went.

The first shock of surprise from the attack quickly passed and many men outside the fence drew guns and returned the fire. A cowboy at Barrett's left, who reached the fence at the same time, staggered backward with a sharp cry of pain, then hit the fence, leaned against a post and thumbed out some fast shots between the poles.

The Tyban-Honing crew were breaking from the shed, running toward the house. Two lanterns that hung from pegs under the shed lighted their going and also lighted the tumult of wounded, dying men scattered around out there by the volleys of lead from the Texans.

Some of the horses, recently ridden in by half of Tyban's crew and by the prisoners, were screaming in fright, perhaps wounded by random bullets out there in the darkness under the trees.

Barrett saw then that he should have taken time to dispatch some of the cowboys toward the house to head off their enemies from that refuge. He ran down the fence, calling to the men there to follow him. He climbed the poles at the corner, hit the ground outside and ran through the rain and darkness toward the house.

As he ran, followed by some of his cowboy friends, guns flamed from the front door. In the light from the fireplace in the long bunk room he saw men stagger back from the front door. Through one of the windows he caught a flashing glimpse of Lena Sanders, gun in hand, then she darted from view, going toward the fireplace end of the room. The Tyban-Honing men rushed the door, guns flaming. Barrett saw Harry Tyban leap through the door in the lead of a dozen men, less fearful of the menace within than from that in the darkness outside.

Guns were still popping out around the shed and corrals, men shouted death cries and defiance there; horses were running away, pounding the wet ground with hurried hoofs as if ridden by men who drove them on. Alan Barrett gave only flashing notice to those sounds behind him.

Lena Sanders, pluckily fighting inside there, was in danger. He fired at the horde of men pouring through the front door, heard his companions doing the same. He shouted to the men with him to go on at that front door, then swerved his course and ran for the kitchen porch, throwing out empty shells and inserting fresh cartridges as he ran.

In the dark kitchen he crashed against a chair, picked himself up as he shouted Lena Sanders' name and ran on toward the faint blob of light framed by the door to the bunk room. Lena Sanders answered his cry. He found her crouched by the door facing. She fired the heavy gun in her hands

[*Turn Page*]

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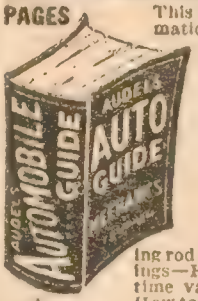

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as he dropped down beside her. He saw Harry Tyban and several men stooping and coming on down the room. Two or three of their guns blazed and a bullet splintered the wood above the girl's head. Barrett shoved her back, out of sight, fell lower and poured shots at the scrambling, ducking men.

HARRY TYBAN had ducked down beside the line of bunks. Guns in the hands of the cowboys outside the front door were pouring a rain of bullets into the room. Tyban men sprawled along the floor, dead or dying; others crawled for the protection of the bunks. The cowboys rushed the door, leaped inside to get at their enemies before these could barricade themselves. One of those first reckless Texans to enter plunged forward on his face. The others came on, thumbing their guns at the surviving killers within.

Barrett stood up, ready to leap inside after Tyban, who had disappeared behind the angle of the nearest bunks as if at a signal and ran toward the door of the other room. Harry Tyban was in the lead.

He fired at Barrett as he ran and deadening pain brought instant paralysis to the cowboy's left arm. In the same instant Barrett heard the frantic, screaming voice of Lena Sanders saying:

"Johnny is in there! They'll kill him!"

But two of Tyban's three followers fell then from the cowboys' bullets as Barrett stumbled out into the room and aimed a waist-high shot at Tyban, his shooting arm too weak to lift the gun higher. Tyban staggered sideways against the jamb of the fireplace, went to his knees and lifted his gun toward the wavering form of the Texan. Barrett was dazed, but he flung himself aside as he thumbed the

[*Turn To Page* 126]

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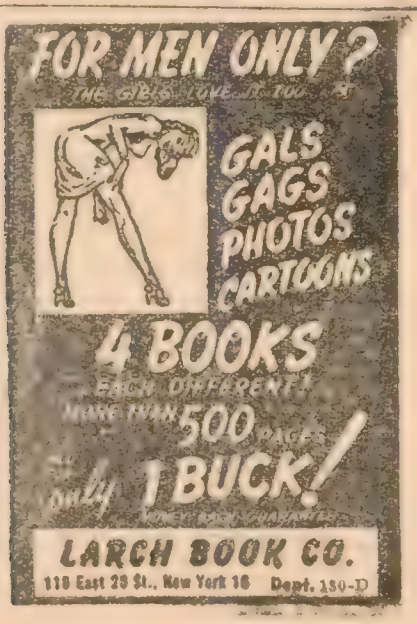

hammer of his gun back and released it, the muzzle of his weapon only a few feet from the licking flame of Tyban's gun.

"Take that, Tyban, for Hollis Mayhew!" he shouted weakly.

The world spun around in dizzying gyrations and the floor seemed to come up with a smashing blow against the side of his head, then all sensation faded out.

When consciousness returned to him, Barrett felt the comforting softness of a real bed under him. His head and left shoulder were bandaged. Lena Sanders sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand. She spoke to him softly, anxiously testing his consciousness. He assured her he was all right, then saw bright morning light through the windows.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "Did I sleep all night? What happened? Are the others all right, Lena?"

"Johnny and the Texas boys are out rounding up the loose cattle," she explained. "Harry Tyban and Jock Honing are dead with a lot of their men that didn't run away in time to save themselves." She tucked a lock of his hair back under the bandage and added: "You were so brave and wonderful. I can never forget!"

He squeezed her hand gently and watched the glistening tears in her eyes. After a while she spoke again, a note of sorrow in her soft, husky voice: "I suppose you'll be going back to Texas as soon as you're well enough."

He said: "I've got a little ranch down in the tall grass country. Reckon you and your brother'd like to go see it with me, Lena?"

She seemed unable to speak, but joy lit her face with sudden brilliance as she bent impulsively and kissed him.

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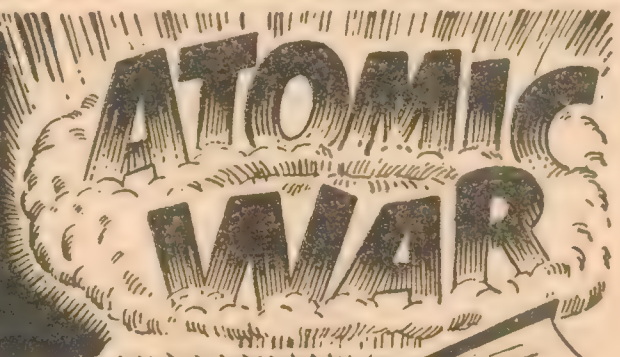

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SWEETHEART of Wishing Creek

(*continued from page* 71)

whole country will turn itself upside down to find out who killed the schoolteacher! She's well liked and that Dan Murray is nutty about her."

"What'll we do?" Pop wanted to know.

"We gotta jump the country. She's wrecked our game completely. But we take her with us until we get about four hundred miles away. Then we turn her loose to wander back home. By the time she gets word out we'll be miles away and safe."

"Your game will be shot to hell," Pop snarled. "You want these homesteads. You almost got them. I made good money here sellin' that stolen beef acrost the Line. I hate to see a female break up a good game—"

"Get ready to move, men."

The boy said suddenly, "I heard something back there—"

Nedra had heard it, too. It had the sound of a boot breaking a twig—a boot that had cautiously advanced through the brush, and had accidentally stepped on a dried cottonwood twig.

"Man over there!" Pa screamed, and he raised his rifle.

Nedra screamed, too. A man had come out of the brush, and his pistol roared twice. Nedra was moving quickly. Her fear was gone, she was alive and angry—she hit the boy with both fists, driving him back. He had not expected her savage feminine attack, for he had been raising his rifle to

[*Turn To Page* 130]

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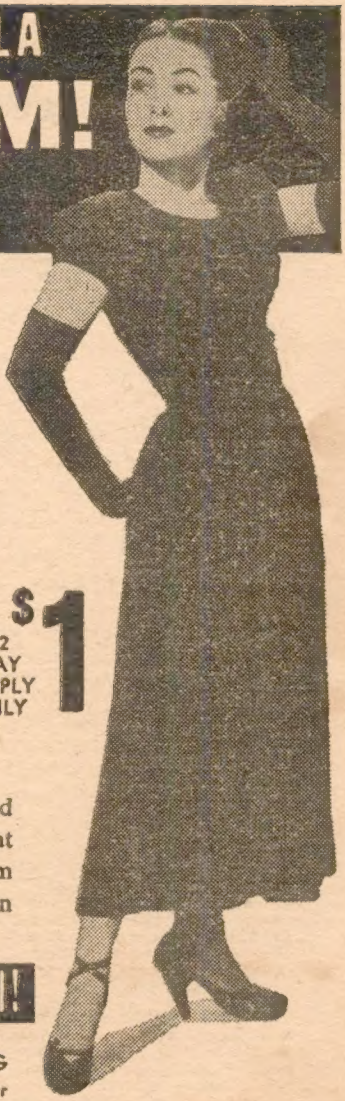

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shoot at Dan Murray. When Nedra hit him, his Winchester exploded—but the bullet sang skyward harmlessly.

"I'll learn you to doublecross me," she panted.

Learn you! Gosh, she was excited; she even spoke incorrectly. *Teach* you! But what difference did a verb make? She screamed, "Dan, I'll get this boy —you get the other—"

She saw that Pa was down, lying in the brittle grass. From the corner of her eye she saw the third man—the other man she had trailed out from town—running toward the brush, running away from Dan.

"I can't shoot—him— In the back—"

SHE HAD the rifle. She swung it around and the barrel collided with the unruly boy's head. She hit him again and he went down unconscious. He wouldn't sass her again, or he wouldn't cut up in her classes—

She caught herself, thought, *You're a wildcat, Nedra.* She glimpsed Dan running by her trying to catch the fleeing man. The man reached the brush and then Dan stopped, for another man—somebody who had hidden in the brush—was struggling with the fellow.

"He slugged him," Dan said. "There he comes dragging him outa the brush. Good work, Ben Travis."

"My—my father?"

Moonlight showed Ben Travis' whiskery smile. "Dan came over home and told me what you had told him, Nedra. We headed for town and Millicent said you'd never even been at her house. So we waited an' we trailed you— Who is this button I laid a rifle against, anyhow?"

Nedra said, "Martin Dunlap."

Dunlap was out cold. Ben Travis stared at him, said hollowly, "So he was the one behind it, eh? He is the one what wanted our land. He had this gent here out in the badlands—"

"He'll pay," Dan gritted. "Pay through the teeth. Every cent I got will go against him in court." Dan was kneeling beside the man he had shot. "This gent is alive, too. Not wounded bad. We'll get them in saddle an' head for town an' the sheriff—"

Nedra felt weak in the knees, and she walked to her pony. Within a few moments, they were riding out of the small valley, leaving the cabin dark and lonely. With the three riding ahead of Ben Travis, Nedra and Dan fell back a few rods, letting her father herd the three toward town.

Nedra said, "I looked back good but I didn't see you and Dad, Dan."

"Let's not talk about that."

"What'll we—talk about?"

"Us."

He reached out and stopped her horse. She looked at him and he looked at her. She said, "Dan—"

He said, "Nedra—"

Then both were silent. You don't talk when somebody like Dan kisses you, because when he kisses you—you stay kissed.

Nedra closed her eyes.

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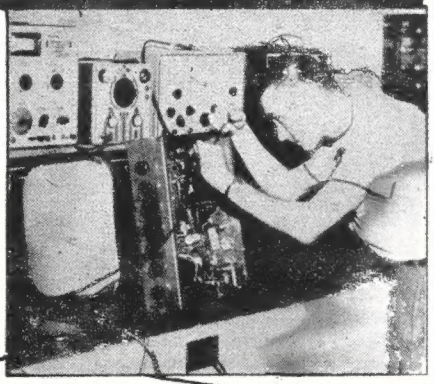

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